**SA CROSS COUNTRY SET FOR DESERT BATTLE**

*National Cross Country Championship heads for Ganyesa*

It’s all to play for as the Trademore South African Cross Country Championship limbers up to its annual desert race at Excelsior Farm at Ganyesa north of Vryburg this weekend. Davin Cocker’s OR2 Husqvarna and OR1 KTM rider Bradley Cox arrive in the Northwest tied in the championship lead, but under pressure from Seniors’ sensation Kerim Fitz-Gerald and his KTM, and Honda rider Michael Pentecost.

OR2 man Scott Heygate sits sixth in the overall title chase on his KTM, ahead of OR3 leaders, Honda lads Haydn Cole and Erik Merry. Second OR1 man, Gareth Cole is next up on his Honda from High School leader Luke Walker, and OR3 riders, Kawasaki lad Wian Wentzel, and Ryan Pelser’s Husqvarna. Pieter Holl leads Masters for Kawasaki, while Murray Smith tops the Junior pops on his Husqvarna.

The opening two races saw a typical Gauteng route at the Legends opener before a far more technical challenge at Jolivet in KZN. Pending dry conditions, Ganyesa brings a different challenge in the Kalahari semi-desert. That said, freezing and wet conditions wreaked havoc in last year’s race there, so anything can still happen

It’s between Bradley Cox on his Brother Leader Tread KTM and Michael Pentecost in open class 450cc OR1. They will have the closest attentions of Honda trio, Pentecost’s Franchise Co Tork Craft teammate Gareth Cole, Ian Rall, and Hayden Louw. Factory Husqvarna racer Davin Cocker is the 350cc OR2 man to beat with two wins in two races so far. Scott Heygate, fellow KTM riders Kyle Eggar, sister Leah Heygate, Juan Niebuhr, and Teak Harrower on a GasGas will present his toughest opposition.

Kerim Fitz-Gerald has been in sensational Seniors’ form on his KTM this season, as his overall championship third suggests. But he has Honda duo, comeback king Louwrens Mahoney and Wynand Delport, Marco Cocci on a Yamaha and the late starting 2022 champion Kenny Gilbert’s Kawasaki on his case. Masters has been all about Pieter Holl and his Kawasaki in 2023, but Mielies Le Roux on a KTM, Husqvarna rider Wayne Farmer and Brian Bontekoning’s Kawasaki, among others, will have other ideas.

Luke Walker leads Thomas Scales’ similar KTM in the 125 cc high school chase. They have Sherco duo, Daniel Peckham and Blake Young, KTM trio Brandon Clarke, Rory Donaldson and Nathan Westerdale, and Derek Karam on a Yamaha to cope with too. Murray Smith leads the 85 Junior chase on his Franchise Co Tork Craft Husqvarna from Franco Fourie’s KTM, Corbin Muller’s Husqvarna and KTM kids Mackenzie Bam and Drikus van der Merwe.

GJ Coetzee is the 65 cc lad to beat on his Husqvarna, which is precisely what KTM gang Zach Wichmann, Cambeul du Preez and Joshua Fotheringham, Matthew Meyer on a GasGas, and Wilco du Plooy’s Yamaha intend to do. Honda arrives at Ganyesa in the 2023 Trademore South African Cross Country Manufacturers Championship lead just 10 points clear of KTM, with Husqvarna fighting Kawasaki for third ahead of Sherco, Yamaha and GasGas.