**POTGIETER TIGHTENS SA RALLY GRIP**

*JJ & Tommy dominate dramatic NTT Tzaneen Rally*

JJ Potgieter and Tommy du Toit laid down yet another marker in their quest to become 2023 South African National Rally Champions by convincingly winning both rounds of the weekend’s double-header NTT Tzaneen Rally. The dynamic winning duo’s progress was eased by an event of attrition, which saw several top contenders falling by the wayside.

Potgieter, du Toit and their Hyundai R4 won 11 of the thirteen Tzaneen special stages over two days. The forests were however hungry as prime title rivals; Jono van Wyk and Nico Swartz were sidelined when they irreparably blew their Toyota Gazoo Racing Starlet engine early on Friday, shortly before defending champions, Chris Coertse and Greg Godrich’s Rally Technik Mazda2 hit a tree, and Mandla Mdakane and Kes Naidoo hit a rock to damage the second Gazoo Starlet’s sub-frame.

**Round 5: JJ Beats the Attrition**

The horrors of those opening stages and resultant attrition rate meant that Friday would prove a relatively easy run for Potgieter and di Toit. “This is a very technical rally,” JJ suggested before the start. “Going too quickly to try and make up seconds is likely to land you in trouble. My plan this weekend, is to take things cautiously and just see what happens, but we must finish to score the points we need.”

Cautious he may have been in his head, but Potgieter opened the betting with a 2.9-second opening Salom Shooting Range win over van Wyk, and an 8.6-second gap to Coertse. The decimation however soon commenced, as van Wyk went out with that broken engine on the second Agatha Forests to allow Potgieter to extend his lead over Coertse, with Theuns Joubert and Schalk van Heerden third in their Salom Toyota Yaris.

It was not a good start either for Benjamin Habig and Barry White, who regularly contend with the all-wheel drive NRC1 cars with their front-wheel drive NRC2 Just Tools Volkswagen Polo. “We lost nearly six minutes in the first two stages when the boost pump failed,” Habig rued back in the service park. “Now that’s sorted we can maybe start to get back into it. The stages are slippery and rough in places but I’m happy with that.”

Then Coertse also exited after his altercation with the tree, leaving Potgieter well out in front after the NTT Isuzu Dam Stage 3. He was chased by NRC2 trio, Nico and Juandre Nienaber’s Toyota Etios, Habig back on the pace in a strong third and Gerald Klopper and Etienne Lourens’ Toyota Etios after quick run to fourth ahead of Johan Strauss and Elzaan Venter’s NRC1 Subaru Impreza. The forest was however still hungry as Mdakane and Naidoo, and Magriet Potgieter and Rikus Fourie’s NRC2 Ford Fiesta also retired.

Potgieter lost time on the second run through the NTT Honda Agatha, but fought home in sixth as Joubert powered to the win from Paul van Niekerk and Willejan Human’s Subaru Impreza, with Habig, Klopper, Nienaber and Potgieter in chase.

With that minor hiccup behind him and cheered on by the large crowd gathered on the streets of Tzaneen, Potgieter went on to win both NTT Town Twister tests to take overall and NRC 1 honours from van Niekerk and Human, and Joubert and van Heerden. The Nienabers held sway to take NRC2 honours from Klopper and Lourens with Habig and White in third.

**Round 6: Potgieter Doubles Up**

JJ Potgieter and Tommy du Toit wasted no time to set the pace and win Saturday’s technical opening Supaquick Test Centre stage by a little over a second from the fired up Mdakane and Naidoo, and Strauss and Venter’s Subaru. Mdkane and Naidoo had benefited some late-night toil by the Toyota Gazoo Racing team, which was able to repair the damage to their car to make the Saturday start. Sadly the same could not be said for Jono van Wyk’s engine repair.

Moving back into the forest for the, Potgieter once again blitzed the opposition on the CIM Lubri Fuel Agatha test from Mdakane, with Klopper and Lourens turning up the NRC2 heat in third. “I’m pacing myself but we cannot ease up too much,” leader Potgieter admitted. “That can mean a disastrous loss of concentration.” This ‘easing up’ showed on the first visit to the NTT Isuzu Dam stage where JJ was second on that to Joubert and just clear of Habig, while Mdakane slipped to ninth.

Potgieter went fastest to restore the status on the PPS Pipeline test ahead of a tense NRC2 battle between Klopper and the Nienabers, after Habig suffered gearbox trouble to retire in the Dam stage. So Klopper led NRC2 rival Nienaber by a minute overall as both also endured gearbox problems. All of which allowed Potgieter the luxury of cruising to third through the Star Spares Finale. He left regional pairing Erik de Jager and Jonty Brown’s Subaru to take the stage from and NRC2 winners, Klopper and Lourens.

Overall victory in both NTT Tzaneen Rally rounds now leave Potgieter and du Toit in an almost unassailable 2023 South African National Rally Championship points lead with two double-header events left to run, commencing with the Delmas Rally 9-10 October.