**DAKAR WEEK 2 STARTS WITH A BANG**

*Loeb closes car gap, one second splits bikers Brabec & Branch*

The second week of Dakar started with a bang on four and two wheels in the 483 km race to Al Duwadimi on Sunday. Sebastien Loeb’s Hunter took a third of Carlos Sainz’ Audi’s half-hour lead back with the stage win as seven South African cars filled the top ten, and second overnight, Mattias Ekström’s Audi was stuck in the desert. And just one second separates US leader Ricky Brabec and Botswana hero Ross Branch in the bikes.

The car day started with a single Audi between a trio of Toyotas. Gazoo Hilux duo, Californian Seth Quintero and Dennis Zenz led Guerlain Chicherit and Alex Winocq’s similar privateer car, Swedes Ekström and Emil Bergkvist in the Audi, and Brazilian Lucas Moraes and Armand Monleon in another Gazoo Hilux.

The drama had already started with Spanish Dakar legend Nani Roma and Alex Haro Bravo retiring their M-Sport NWR Ford Ranger even before that first waypoint. Then Ekstrom’s Audi, which was running second overall, ground to a halt. That left Quinteiro leading Chicherit, Moraes, and Czech Ford Raptor privateers Martin Prokop and Viktor Chytka.

South African Century Racing duo, French rear-drive class leaders Frenchmen Mathieu Serradori and Loic Minaudier, and Brian Baragwanath and Leonard Cremer’s 4x4 version, and Italian Hilux duo Eugenio Amos and Paolo Cechi in seventh, and rookie leaders Guy Botterill and Brett Cummings Toyota Gazoo Hilux in tenth, made it seven SA cars in the top ten.

The last mentioned were separated by the Prodrive Hunters of Sebastien Loeb and Fabian Lurquin, and Nasser Al-Attiyah and Mathieu Baumel. Overall leaders Carlos Sainz and Lucas Cruz’ petrol-electric Audi sat 14th. The order remained static until mid-distance, but Moraes and Loeb were on the move and soon up to first and third, with Quinteiro second, Al Attiyah fourth and Serradori fifth.

The action continued up front as Loeb went ahead from Serradori, Moraes, Quinteiro, Chicherit and Sainz at three-quarter distance. Sensational in the dunes with his 4x2 Century, Serradori however slipped back on the rocky paths home, as Loeb sped home to a 7-minute victory over Moraes, Al Attiyah and Sainz, who was over ten minutes off the pace.

Chicherit followed from Serradori, Viktor Zala and Paulo Fiuza’s Mini, Quinteiro and Giniel de Villiers and Dennis Murphy’s Gazoo Hilux provisionally sat in ninth from Prokop and Baragwanath. Of South African interest, Botterill retained his rookie advantage in 16th, Aliyyah Koloc was 30th in the best of the SA Red-Lined REVO T1+s. Rookies, Saood Variawa ran 41st as Gareth Woolridge and Boyd Dreyer’s NWR Ford Ranger found trouble during the stage.

Of greatest car interest on the day however, Sebastien Loeb took a third of Carlos Sainz’ half-hour overall advantage back. The Frenchman now trails the Spaniard by 19 minutes. Lucas Moraes sits third, an hour off the pace and leading of a trio of SA-built Hiluxes with Guillaume de Mevius and Giniel de Villiers fourth and fifth.

Prokop’s Raptor sits sixth from Serradori’s 4x2 leading Century, and Hilux trio Chicherit, rookie leader Botterill, and Vangas. In other words, seven of the top ten cars overall are made in South Africa. Of the rest, Variawa lies 20th, and provisionally, Koloc, Quinteiro and Baragwanath sit 26th, 27th and 28th.

If the car race is intriguing, then the bike race is proving a thriller. While Chilean Jose Florimo stormed to his third Dakar 2024 bike win in seven stages, the real focus remains on the fight for the overall lead. Florimo’s Californian Honda teammate Ricky Brabec followed Hero rival, Botswana rider and multiple former South African champion Ross Branch home in fifth. But Branch closed the deficit down to just one second in the process!

Chilean Pablo Quintanilla opened the bike stage in style to lead early on aboard his Honda, with Ross Branch second on his Hero from Portuguese rider Rui Gonçalves’ Sherco and South African champion Bradley Cox leading Rally 2 on his BAS KTM. Quintanilla’s compatriot and teammate Jose Florimo however bounced into the lead at the 134 km waypoint, but Kevin Benavides was ahead from Florimo by mid distance.

Luciano Benavides sat third in front of an intriguing battle between overall top two, Brabec and Branch, with the lead of the race changing between them by the waypoint. Florimo went back into the lead over Kevin Benavides at 344 km with seconds still between the leaders in fourth and fifth on the road as Florimo duly powered home to a 52 second win over Kevin and Luciano Benavides, Branch and Brabec.

That left Brabec leading Branch by all of a single second overall after nine days and almost 3,000 kilometres of racing in an intriguing game of cat and mouse up front. Behind them, triple stage winner Florimo has closed the gap down to six minutes 48 seconds in third, from Honda teammate Adrien van Beveren 15 minutes adrift, Kevin Benavides, Price, and Sanders.

Of the South Africans, Cox finished the day 17th and sits 15th overall and fifth in Rally 2. Husqvarna duo, Charan Moore was 22nd on the day, provisionally sits 21st overall and 9th in R2, and Zimbabwean Ash Thixton was 36th on Tuesday and sits 31st overall and 19th in R2. Ronald Venter was running 60th and Malle Moto man Stuart Gregory 78th.

Monday’s 458 kilometre stage starts with dunes and sand before racing to the finish on dirt tracks. The bike focus is squarely on Brabec and Branch fighting for the win and Florimo closing in from behind. Your Dakar Daily Report s powered by Toyota Gazoo Racing and Tork Craft tools.