**ADVANTAGE AUDI AT DAKAR 2024**

*Branch on bike fight, 7 SA cars still in Dakar top ten*

It was all about the petrol-electric Audis as Mattias Ekström led Stéphane Peterhansel home to a 1-2, while Carlos Sainz consolidated his overall lead in fourth on Monday’s Dakar Stage 8 to Ha’il. The bike race game of cat and mouse also continued, as leader Ricky Brabec ended seventh ahead of closest rival Ross Branch to keep the gap between them within a minute, while Kevin Benavides won the day.

With everything to gain and looking for a hat-trick of car day wins to close down their deficit to leader Sainz, nine-time World Rally Champion Sebastien Loeb and Fabian Lurquin came out of their corner fighting in their Prodrive Hunter. Sainz however held a watching brief, seconds adrift and ahead of Guerlain Chicherit and Alex Winocq‘s Toyota Hilux and Qatari Dakar legend Nasser Al-Attiyah and Mathieu Baumel’s second Prodrive Hunter.

Al Attiyah stopped at the side of the road with a broken engine shortly after, as Chicherit picked up the challenge to his leading teammate Loeb. Sainz sat third from, Swedes Ekström and Emil Bergkvist’s Audi, third overall Brazilian Lucas Moraes and Armand Monleon’s Gazoo Hilux, and Mr. Dakar, Stéphane Peterhansel and Edouard Boulanger’s third Audi.

There was another scare for Prodrive just after the open section when Loeb lost ten minutes, leaving Ekström leading Chicherit, Peterhansel, and Sainz. A train of Hiluxes followed with Californian Seth Quintero and Dennis Zenz heading Gazoo teammates Moraes and Giniel de Villiers and Dennis Murphy, and privateers Guillaume de Mevius and Xavier Panseri, and Le Mans winner Romain Dumas and Max Delfino, and Loeb.

There was a reshuffle through to the finish as Ekström led Peterhansel to an Audi 1-2 from Chicherit and Sainz, who consolidated his overall lead. Quinteiro was fifth from de Mevius, Moraes, Dumas and de Villiers who slipped from sixth in the short final sector. Loeb was tenth to concede 11 minutes to Sainz, from Mathieu Serradori and Loic Minaudier who maintained their rear-drive T1.2 class dominance in the SA-built Century CR6-T.

Of other South African interest, Gazoo Hilux rookies, leader Guy Botterill and Brett Cummings, and Saood Variawa and Frenchman Francois Cazalet were 18th and 19th. SA crew Brian Baragwanath and Leonard Cremer ended 28th in the 4x4 Century CR-7T and impressive teen lady Aliyyah Koloc and Sebastien Delaunay 30th in the best of the made in SA Red-Lined REVO+ T1+s. Nani Roma and Alex Haro Bravo returned to action in the NWR Ford Ranger.

Overall, Sainz mare up half of the gap he lost to Loeb on Sunday to lead his fellow multiple former rally champion by 24 minutes. Lucas Moraes remains in third, an hour and five adrift, from de Mevius, de Villiers, Chicherit and Martin Prokop’s Ford Raptor. Rear drive leader Serradori sat eighth ahead of rookie leader Botterill, with Variawa 20th, Koloc 26th and the rest carrying heavy penalties way behind. Seven South African cars remain in the top ten.

While Californian Honda rider Brabec was flying form to lead the two-wheeled race throughout the morning, he faded later in the day to allow the Benavides brothers, Kevin’s KTM to take the 458 Stage from Luciano on a Husqvarna. Brabec conceded his lead to teammate Adrien van Beveren before Kevin Benavides moved ahead of Brabec at the final waypoint.

Both Kevin and brother Luciano Benavides however managed to find a way past van Beveren by the finish as the KTM man finally broke a long line of Honda Stage wins since his own previous win on Day 3 It was even worse for Brabec, who tumbled to seventh behind another Chilean teammate, Jose Florimo, Toby Price’s KTM and Rui Gonçalves on a Sherco.

Brabec also finished just 41 seconds ahead of Botswana Hero rider Ross Branch to extend his overall advantage to just 42 seconds over Branch. Third overall, Florimo meanwhile closed his deficit down on both the bike leaders and sits 4 minutes 21 seconds off the lead, with van Beveren, Kevin Benavides and Price in chase.

Of the rest of the Southern Africans, Bradley Cox enjoyed a great stage and led Rally 2 on the fringes of the overall top ten for most of the morning. Like some of the leaders, he slipped back to finish the day fifteenth and fourth in R2. Cox also sits 25th overall and fifth in Rally 2, just 19 minutes behind class leader Romain Dumontier.

Charan Moore had a solid ride to 29th on Monday and sits 18th overall and seventh in Rally 2 on his Husqvarna. Zimbabwean Ash Thixton followed Moore home in 35th on his similar machine and he sits 32nd overall. KTM riders, Malle Moto no service rider Stuart Gregory sat 83rd and was provisionally Ronald venter was placed 77th on the day and 63rd overall.

Tuesday’s 417 km race to Al’Ula includes a little bit of everything. With four days and almost 2,000 km left to race, Dakar is by no means close to completion. Anything can still happen! Your Dakar Daily Report is Powered by Toyota Gazoo Racing and Tork Craft tools.