**BRILLIANT BRANCH, COX WIN DAKAR STAGE 11**

*Ross beats Brabec bonus to win, stays second, Cox takes R2*

Dakar’s Bike Stage 11 proved a brilliant one for Southern Africa as Botswana rider Ross Branch won the day to consolidate his second place. SA rider Bradley Cox meanwhile stormed to the Rally 2 win to move onto podium and into contention for a shock R2 win. Overall leader Ricky Brabec benefited significant bonuses to end second on Thursday to consolidate his motorcycle lead with 172 km left to race on Friday

They say that Dakar has a sting in the tail. After two weeks and over 7,000 km in the saddle, the men are exhausted, the machines brittle. But with just the day’s 480 km sandy dirt track Stage 11 and that final 175 km to the finish, some racers had it all to do on Thursday. And that’s why Dakar’s penultimate day is famous for dealing out a sting in the tail.

Multiple former South African Cross Country champion Ross Branch was one of those with it all to do on his little fancied Hero Moto. In the lead, or second place from the outset, Branch had slipped to ten minutes behind Californian Honda rider Ricky Brabec and sat second, under a minute clear of Brabec’s French teammate Adrien van Beveren.

Ross wasted no time to forge into the Stage 11 lead by the second waypoint, from van Beveren and reigning South African champion Bradley Cox leading Rally 2 on his BAS KTM. Like his fellow SA champion, Cox had it all to do as he lay fourth in Rally 2 overnight, with a sniff of a late breakthrough in mind. Brabec meanwhile sat tenth, over two minutes off the pace.

Branch controlled the pace up front, leading by around a minute from van Beveren and defending champion, Argentine Luciano Benavides’ Husqvarna, with Cox troubling both of them as he climbed into the Rally 2 podium positions and closed in on that class leader overall. Brabec meanwhile sat sixth, over four minutes off Branch but benefiting more than five minutes of road-opening bonus to effectively make him the leader of the day.

Yet in spite of Brabec’s seemingly generous almost six minutes of first starter bonuses, Branch still rode home the winner of the day, even if his rival’s extra minutes prevented Ross form halving the lead. Van Beveren rode home third, conceding over two minutes to Branch in the overall order, with Luciano Benavides fourth from Toby Price’s KTM and dominant Rally 2 winner Cox.

Brabec leads Cox by ten minutes overall, with van Beveren two and a half minutes behind. Harith Noah’s Sherco took the R2 lead by six minutes from Raymond Dumontier’s Husqvarna and Cox, now just 35 seconds back in third. Reliability and exhaustion took its penultimate day toll as ever, with Chilean contender Jose Florimo slowed by fuel pump issues on his Honda, while Portuguese Sherco rider Rui Gonçalves crashed out of 11th overall.

Further back, South Africa’s Charan Moore’s Husqvarna sat 25th, while Zimbabwean Ash Thixton rode in 35th on his similar machine, with both of them interestingly occupying the same positions overall. KTM duo Ronald Venter sat 58th on the road and 64th overall, and

Malle Moto man Stuart Gregory 82nd on the day, and 75th overall.

Only Friday’s final 175 km loop to the finish remains left to race. Will that be enough to change the order? All Brabec now needs to do is ride home to protect his advantage. But rest assured, it will be a flat out race home for the leaders, but remember, that Dakar sting in the tail. It’s cruel! Your Daily Dakar Bike Report is powered by Tork Craft Tools, Ross Branch’s choice!