**COERTSE’S DULLSTROOM DOUBLE**

*Two wins for outgoing champions amid SA Rally final drama*

Wild weather, infringements, off-road excursions, and lead changes right up to the finish meant plenty of surprises in the final two South African National Rallies of 2023. But it was outgoing champions, Chris Coertse, Greg Godrich and their NRC 1 Rally Technic Mazda2 who came to the fore to relinquish their Number 1 plate in marvellous double victory style at a muddy and challenging TRACN4 rally in the highland forests of Dullstroom over the weekend.

**Friday: Last Gasp for Coertse & Godrich**

Behind them, what should have been a fast, straight fight in the dust turned out to be a battle for survival. Bright sunshine greeted competitors at the start, and with JJ Potgieter and Tommy du Toit and their Hyundai already crowned 2023 SA champions, all eyes were Coertse and Godrich locked in battle with Benjamin Habig and Barry White in their NRC 2 Just Tools Volkswagen Polo for that championship second overall.

“It would be great to claim that second place, but our goal has always been to win the two-wheel drive class this season,” Barry White explained. Sadly, it all went wrong for Habig and White shortly after the start of first special stage when. The Polo lost drive and could not be recovered until all the cars had passed, forcing their retirement for the day and leaving the way open for the Mazda duo to forge ahead.

The big movers of the first morning were however dark horses, Theuns Joubert and Schalk van Heerden who stormed through to win the opening stage in their Salom Toyota Auris by 10 seconds from Coertse and Godrich. Champions Potgieter and du Toit clearly took it easier than their normal all-out charge in third. Mandla Mdakane and Kes Naidoo then surprised with a fine 10-second stage 2 win in their Gazoo Racing Toyota Starlet over Joubert and van Heerden and Coertse and Godrich to bring a little just reward for the troubled Gazoo team.

A clock-in error however cost the Gazoo crew a four minute penalty. Joubert and van Heerden extended their lead to 17 seconds over Coertse and Godrich in the third test. Potgieter and du Toit were third ahead of Gerald Klopper and Etienne Lourens’ GK Toyota Auris and leading NRC 2 crew, Gustav Potgieter and Armand du Toit’s Atlas Oil Ford Fiesta R2.

Joubert beat Coertse and Mdkane on stage 4 before short and sudden lightning storm hit Stage 5 to turn the dust into a muddy an ice-rink. Leaders Joubert and van Heerden suffered puncture with 10 kilometres left to rally and lost 58 seconds. Fourth placed Klopper lost a wheel and veered off into a tree, leaving the car in a vulnerable position to slow Gustav Potgieter and George Smalberger and Shaun Visser’s Shield Q20 Polo

All that gifted Coertse and Godrich a 35 second lead. But the final stage was cancelled on safety concerns to cement a dramatic victory for Coertse and Godrich from the delayed Joubert and van Heerden and casual Potgieter and du Toit. Fourth on the road, Mdakane and Naidoo suffered engine failure on the open section to retire and promote Gustav Potgieter to fourth ahead of Lynton Swatton and Tommy Coetzee’s RBS Plumbing Toyota RunX.

**Saturday: More Grand Theft Rally**

The weather cleared overnight as Saturday dawned bright and clear with Joubert and van Heerden going all out on the early stages running in reverse on the previous day’s tests. They established an eight second advantage over Potgieter and du Toit and also took 29 seconds off Coertse and Godrich. NRC2 winner Gustav Potgieter followed from Habig and Johan Strauss and Elzaan van der Schyff’s Agri Online Subaru WRX, back in action after Friday engine problems.

With the Hyundai cleared of its misfire, Potgieter took the second stage from Joubert, Coertse and Habig heading the NRC 2 chase, with Anton Raaths and Marie Ducasse’s AR Panel Escort Cosworth fifth on the road. The rally seemed to settle into a pattern as Joubert won Stage 3 from Potgieter, Coertse and Habig, before Potgieter upped the pace to take Stage 4 to slash Joubert’s lead, with Coertse holding a watching brief in third.

There was confusion when official challenges saw Stage 5 cancelled, leaving only stages 6 and 7 to rally. Coertse pounced to take the first test from Joubert and Potgieter. Potgieter was however beset with a misfire, as Habig lost a wheel over a hard yump. He fought on to the finish the stage and carried on to the service park on three wheels. This transgressed regulations, resulting in Habig being excluded.

Coertse sensationally then took 12 seconds off Joubert in the final Legends stage to steal overall victory once again and secure second in the National standings. NRC 2 winner Gustav Potgieter ended third on the day from struggling 2023 SA champion JJ Potgieter, Magriet Potgieter and Rikus Fourie’s NRC 2 Ford Fiesta and Bruce Swatton and Adrian du Plessis RBS Plumbing Toyota Auris.

In the end, JJ Potgieter is the 2023 South African Rally Driver’s Champion from Chris Coertse and Gustav Potgieter, while Tommy du Toit took the Navigator’s title from Greg Godrich and Barry White. Benjamin Habig’s exclusion was all the more painful as it let Gustav Potgieter through to take the NRC 2 title, with George Smalberger third. Barry White took the NRC 2 navigators title from Armand du Toit and Shaun Visser.

It all starts all over again when the 2024 South African Rally Championship kicks off on the weekend of 15 and 16 March.