**BRABEC & BRANCH IN DAKAR BIKE CAT & MOUSE**

*One second separates bike leaders after seven days of racing*

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 on the 483 km race over mixed terrain to Al Duwadimi, Saudi Arabia on Sunday, but Branch closed the deficit down to just one second!

Chilean Pablo Quintanilla opened the stage in style to lead early on aboard his Honda, to with Ross Branch second on his Hero, Portuguese rider Rui Gonçalves’ Sherco, and South African champion Bradley Cox leading Rally 2 on his BAS KTM. Overall leader, Californian Ricky Brabec sat sixth on his Honda from Argentine Kevin Benavides’ KTM, Branch, brother Luciano Benavides’ Husqvarna, Goncalves, Brabec and Cox.

Quintanilla’s compatriot and teammate Jose Florimo however bounced into the lead at the 134 km waypoint, but Kevin Benavides was leading 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 changing between them by the waypoint. Cox had meanwhile slipped back into a battle with the R2 leaders in 17th.

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. Florimo duly powered home to a 52 second win over Kevin and Luciano Benavides, Branch, Brabec, Daniel Sanders’ GasGas, Stefan Svitko’s KTM, Price, Goncalves, van Beveren and Czech KTM privateer Michel Michek in tenth.

That left Brabec leading Branch overall by all of a single second 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 provisionally finished the day 16th and sits 15th overall and fifth in Rally 2. Husqvarna duo, Charan Moore was 23rd on the day, provisionally sits 21st overall and 9th in R2, and Zimbabwean Ash Thixton was 25th on Tuesday and sits 31st overall and 19th in R2. Ronald Venter was running 42nd and Malle Moto man Stuart Gregory 60th.

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 Bike Report is powered by Tork Craft tools.