**SAINZ, BRABEC WIN DAKAR, SOUTH AFRICA DONE PROUD**

Branch second overall, Cox 3rd in R2, seven SA cars in Dakar top ten

Spaniards Carlos Sainz and Lucas Cruz quite literally cruised home to clinch El Matador’s fourth Dakar win at Yanbu in Saudi Arabia on Friday It was a major petrol-electric coup for Audi, while seven South African made cars filled the top ten. It was instead a flat out race on two wheels, where Ricky Brabec clinched his second Dakar bike win as he held former multiple South African Champion Ross Branch’s Hero Moto off on the short final loop.

Consistent Sainz may not have won a stage through the 5,000 km two-week epic across the Arabian Desert. But his alternate energy Audi was also the only top entry not to hit major trouble in the two weeks. Second placed SA-built Toyota Hilux privateers, Belgian Guillaume de Mevius and Xavier Panseri did what they had to with second behind stage winners Prodrive duo Sebastien Loeb and Fabian Lurquin in the final stage, to hold Loeb off for a close second overall.

Nine-time World Rally Champion Loeb was second and fighting for the lead, and Brazilian Lucas Moraes and Armand Monleon’s Gazoo Toyota Hilux was third, when both hit trouble on the penultimate stage. That allowed de Mevius to take advantage, which he held to take second from Loeb. Frenchmen Guerlain Chicherit and Alex Winocq were fourth in a Toyota Hilux from Czech duo Martin Prokop and Viktor Chytka’s Ford Raptor.

Rookie winners, Guy Botterill and Brett Cummings were the best of the South African crews in their Gazoo Hilux in sixth from teammates Giniel de Villiers and Dennis Murphy. it was de Villiers’ 21st Dakar finish in 21 starts, and his 20th top ten finish. Two more Hiluxes, Lithuanians Benedictus Vangas and Kuldar Sikk, and luckless Moraes and Monleon followed ahead of French rear-drive winners Mathieu Serradori and Loic Minaudier’s Century in tenth.

Seven of the top ten cars home were made in South Africa. Of other South African interest, Saood Variawa and Frenchman Francois Cazaletare made it a Toyota Gazoo Hilux rookie 1-2 in a provisional 18th, while young Aliyyah Koloc and Sebastien Delaunay came home 27th overall in their SA-built, Red-Lined REVO+ T1+, with Belgian rookie gentlemen teammates Stefan Carmans and Antonius van Tiel 34th.

The rest of the South African crews who made the finish have huge stories to tell and significant penalties to suit. Provisionally 38th overall, fast Johannesburg duo Brian Baragwanath and Leonard Cremer were second in a stage. But they struggled on other days on their first outing in the all-new 4x4 Century CT7t.

Quick Californian Seth Quintero and Dennis Zenz bounced back after a major issue to act as water carrier for their Gazoo teammates en route to 42nd overall. SA Ford Ranger crews, Spanish duo Nani Roma and Alex Haro Bravo, and South African rookies Gareth Woolridge and Boyd Dreyer both finished 44th and 46th in a troubled but encouraging debut for the Pietermaritzburg built NWR cars.

Three different carmakers won stages of a 2024 Dakar said to be among the toughest in 46 races. Prodrive may have won six stages, with Sébastien Loeb winning four and a furious Nasser Al Attiyah only one. But reliability took its toll. Toyota won four stages, with Guerlain Chicherit taking two and Guillaume de Mevius and Lucas Moraes one each. Audi won three stages with Mattias Ekström taking two and Stéphane Peterhansel his 50th stage win.

Moving on to two wheels, Ricky Brabec won Dakar 2024 for Honda from Hero Rider Ross Branch and Honda Teammate Adrien van Beveren. Californian Brabec consolidated his 10-minute advantage over the Botswana rider Branch on the final day. from Kevin Benavides and Toby Price took the day in a KTM 1-2 from Luciano Benavides’ Husqvarna. South Africa’s Bradley Cox meanwhile ended third overall in the Rally 2 class.

Brabec, and more so Honda in truth fully deserved the win. The Japanese giant’s factory machines won 8 out of the 12 stages, with every rider contributing to the cause. Nacho Cornejo won three stages, Adrien Van Beveren took two day wins, Ricky Brabec and Pablo Quintanilla one apiece and Tosha Schareina the Prologue. KTM man Kevin Benavides took three stages, but for many, Ross Branch and his Hero Moto were the heroes of Dakar 2024.

The Kalahari Ferrari, Branch was the only Hero Moto rider to last the distance and as such, man alone against the might of Honda. Leading for the first few days overall, he never slipped further back than second overall throughout the two weeks, winning two stages on the way. It was also a huge coup for the tiny Indian Hero Moto, for one of its machines to split the Hondas in second, and beat the might of KTM, Husqvarna, GasGas and the rest.

In the final outcome, Ricky Brabec’s Honda won the 2024 Dakar bike race by 10 minutes 53 seconds from Ross Branch on his Hero. Frenchman van Beveren made it a Honda 1-3 less than two minutes back, from KTM duo Benavides and Price. Jose Florimo was sixth for Honda from Luciano Benavides’ Husqvarna and Daniel Sanders’ GasGas.

Indian Harith Noah took Rally 2 from Frenchman Romain Dumontier’s Husqvarna and South African champion Bradley Cox on his BAS KTM. Austrian Tobias Ebster took no service Malle Moto honours on his KTM.

Of the other Southern Africans, Charan Moore was provisionally 37th on Friday to end up 21st overall, and ninth in Rally 2. Ash Thixton ended 30th on the day to clinch 32nd overall, and 19th in R2. Both of them rode Husqvarnas. KTM man Ronald Venter was 61st on the day and 59th overall, and Malle Moto man Stuart Gregory 64th on Friday and 60th overall. They rode home 48th and 49th respectively in Rally 2.

One of the toughest Dakars on record, the 2024 race was great for Southern African men and machines, with South African Cross Country champions Ross Branch second overall and Bradley Cox third in Rally 2. Never mind seven South African cars in the top ten, a rookie 1-2 for Botterill and Variawa. With Dakar done and dusted, the Rally Raid entries now continue their fight for the 2024 the World Championship in a series of races across the globe.