**JAYDEN SLAYS THE NKOMAZI GIANTS**

*Privateer youngster Els a superb Cross Country third*

Former under-13 Rotax Mini Max karting world champion Jayden Els has quietly been getting to grips with rally raid racing over the past few seasons. But that all changed over the weekend when the young man quite literally turned the South African Rally Raid championship on its head, as he and navigator Henry Köhene stormed to third overall in the gruelling season opening Nkomazi 400 aboard their King Price SVR in Malelane on Saturday.

Els progressed from karting to a double campaign on track in a competitive stint in Polo Cup, and on stage in rallying. His navigator had to drive the rally car on the road sections because Jayden was still too young to take his driving test! Same happened when he stepped across to rally raid, initially in a Renault, before the King Price JE Motorsport team acquired their Red-Lined built former Dakar SVR prototype.

Jayden soon raised eyebrows with his pace, but the championship’s switch up to latest Ultimate T1+ specification left the then slower SVR racing in the T1 Adventurer class. That and pestering technical troubles urged the team to modify the SVR to T1+ Ultimate specifications. “My JE team had to fit new front and rear differentials, new longer wishbone suspension and longer travel dampers, and extend the chassis by 150 mm at the rear,” Jayden explained. “We also fitted a wider body kit to accommodate the new 37-inch wheels.

“We tested the car at the first Regional event in Stella in February and while we had some minor issues to sort, I was excited by the changes. We then did another 300 km of testing and the team was confident that the car was now far more reliable. But we weren’t sure where we would slot in against the more powerful turbocharged factory cars.” So the King Price team headed for Malelane excited, but not quite sure what to expect.

“We started the 11 km Nkomazi Castrol qualifying prologue in 13th position, made no mistakes and enjoyed a perfect stage, so we were expecting a decent outcome. But we were stunned to learn that we were quickest. We had beaten by Henk Lategan’s factory Gazoo Hilux by a second, and the rest!

“That gave us first choice of starting position, so we decided to draw 10th on the road for the Friday loop. Our plan was to bring it home without any issues, so we could also start Saturday’s race in a strong position. Once again, we were surprised to finish that 40 kilometre km stage in sixth, so with qualifying and loop 1 completed, we sat fourth overall, just under 30 seconds behind the leaders. It was all quite surreal!

“Another two loops followed of 168 km each, so me maintained our policy, drove steady and kept out of trouble to bring the car home in third overall. It was a perfect weekend. Despite racing against ten or twelve of the top international crews driving the very latest factory machines in the most competitive rally raid class in the world, our far humbler new car was brilliant right out the box. Henry and I worked so well as a team to make the ideal start to our championship.

“We must however thank our incredible King Price JE Motorsport team for a brilliant job in re-engineering and preparing the perfect car and running it like clockwork throughout the weekend. Had you’d told me that we’d qualify quickest and race home top privateer in third overall on Friday morning, I’d tell you that you were mad! But that’s exactly what we did, and it was such a special moment for all of us. Well done, now to keep that ball rolling!”