**DAKAR’S TAIL STINGS HARD ON PENULTIMATE STAGE 11**

*Sainz out front after drama for Loeb, Moraes. SA bikers stun*

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

Stage 11 once again proved that theory conclusively. Mechanical issues and crashes took their toll in both the cars and bikes. Second and third men in the cars, Sebastien Loeb and Lucas Moraes were among several to lose significant time on a wild day on the leaderboard. Leaving Carlos Sainz in sight of a memorable Audi hybrid victory. And it was a phenomenal stage for Southern Africa on two wheels, with both overall and Rally 2 victories.

Running well back in the field in 22nd where he finished on Wednesday, overall leader Carlos Sainz and Lucas Cruz set the early pace in their petrol-electric Audi. Toyota Hilux privateers Guillaume de Mevius and Xavier Panseri followed ahead of Sainz’ teammates Stéphane Peterhansel and Edouard Boulanger, and Mattias Ekström and Emil Bergkvist. Second overall Sebastien Loeb and Fabian Lurquin’s Prodrive Hunter sat a minute off in 8th.

Loeb pushed back and closed to second behind Sainz, with third overall, Brazilian Lucas Moraes and Armand Monleon’s South African Gazoo Hilux next. They led SA Century Racing duo, rear drive leaders, Frenchmen Mathieu Serradori and Loic Minaudier, rookie leading South African crew Guy Botterill and Brett Cummings’ Gazoo Hilux.

Which is when that famous tail stung. The trouble started when Loeb ground to a halt, while Moraes lost five minutes to leave Sainz leading Serradori, de Mevius, Peterhansel and Botterill. Loeb’s chances of victory, and even second overall were evaporating as the crew struggled to sort their issues. They managed to repair the suspension damage and re-joined an hour and 15 later, having conceded second overall to Moraes by 16 minutes.

Then Botterill lost 20 minutes, and Serradori 25, leaving Guerlain Chicherit and Alex Winocq in the lead literally out of nowhere, from de Mevius, Sainz, Ekstrom, Gazoo Racing rookie Saood Variawa and Francois Cazaletare and Romain Dumas’ Hilux. But the drama was not yet over. Gazoo Toyota’s woes went from bad to worse as Moraes ground to a halt from second, 50 km from home. To gift second and third to Loeb and de Mevius.

All of which meant that Chicherit took the day from de Mevius in a SA Toyota Hilux 1-2 from Sainz, Ekström, and a splendid effort by rookie Variawa in fifth. Christian Lavieille and Valentin Sarreaud’s MD buggy was the quickest 4x2 car on the stage in sixth from Juan Yacopini and Daniel Carreras’ Hilux Vitor Zala and Paulo Fiuza’s Mini.

Of South African interest and Nani Roma and Alex Haro Bravo’s SA-built NWR Ford Ranger was ninth ahead of a recovered Botterill in tenth and rookies Gareth Woolridge and Boyd Dreyer’s second Ford Ranger in 13th. Giniel de Villiers and Dennis Murphy continued Toyota’s tale of woe slipping back to 22nd ahead of Serradori, who ended up 31st ahead of Aliyyah Koloc in her Red-Lined REVO+.

Brian Baragwanath was 31st after backing Serradori through the stage with Moraes 37th and Seth Quintero and Dennis Zenz’s Gazoo Hilux still to finish after providing assistance to stricken teammate Moraes.

Overall after all that commotion, Carlos Sainz is virtually home and free to win his fourth Dakar as Audi closes on petrol-electric hybrid victory. That sting in the tail sees a new man in second as Guillaume de Mevius’ Hilux takes up the chase an hour and 25 adrift and eight minutes clear of Loeb win third.

Guerlain Chicherit is provisionally fourth from Martin Prokop’s Ford Raptor, rookie leader Botterill and de Villiers in seventh, with Moraes and rear drive leader Serradori, the seventh SA car in the top ten, tenth. Variawa in 17th overall also makes it a South African Gazoo Toyota rookie 1-2.

If the cars were a fairy tale for South African machines, then Dakar’s Stage 11 certainly proved brilliant for Southern Africa in the bikes. Botswana rider Ross Branch won the day to consolidate his second place. South African youngster Bradley Cox meanwhile stormed to the Rally 2 win to move onto podium and into contention for a shock R2 win.

Multiple former South African Cross Country champion Branch was another 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 in the overall chase.

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 sat tenth, two minutes off the pace.

Branch controlled the pace up front, and in spite of Brabec’s seemingly generous almost six minutes of first starter bonuses, still rode home the winner of the day. Even if his rival’s extra minutes prevented Ross form halving the lead. Van Beveren ended 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 Branch 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 also took its toll on two wheels with 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 was 23rd to move up to 21st overall while Zimbabwean Ash Thixton rode in 35th on his similar machine to sit 32nd overall. KTM duo Ronald Venter was 57thon the road and 64th overall, and Malle Moto man Stuart Gregory 79th 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 Sainz and Brabec now need do is cruise home to protect their advantages. But rest assured, it will be a flat out race home for the leaders, but remember, that Dakar sting in the tail. As you read above, it’s cruel! Your Daily Dakar Report is powered by Gazoo Racing South Africa and Tork Craft Tools.