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Dakar 2011, Prizes, Ticker tape and Thrills

Marc Coma grabbed a third title, Alejandro Patronelli succeeded his brother, Nasser Al-Attiyah picked up his first Dakar triumph and Vladimir Chagin gained a new record. These four men dominated the 94 bikes, 14 quads, 55 cars and 41 trucks that reached the final finishing line of the Personal Dakar Argentina Chile in Buenos Aires. The heroes of this 33rd edition were celebrated at a both festive and formal final podium ceremony at the La Rural exhibition centre.

Bikes:

Number three for Coma too. For the last six years, two men have dominated the bike category in the last six editions. Marc Coma and Cyril Despres have stood head and shoulders above the competition. As proof, the gap to the third placed rider stands at 1 hour and 40 minutes. This 33rd edition eventually turned in favour of Coma due to two race incidents. The first was disciplinary in nature, when Despres received a 10-minute time penalty for failing to respect the rules in the starting zone. The second, and most significant, took place on the route to Chilecito. In an infernal game of cat and mouse, the Frenchman was too hasty, made a mistake in reading the road-book and ended up on the wrong course for a good while. Wanting to attack too much, the hunter had fallen into his own trap. Despres was surely thinking he could cause his rival to succumb to the pressure, like in 2007, when the Catalan lost his first place two days from the end due to a fall, but this time it was the Frenchman who lost out. Four days from the end of the race, the gap of more than 18 minutes had become a chasm that was too wide to leap, all the more so because Coma managed to ride a perfect race, combining performance and experience. On his KTM 450 RR, the 34-year old rider won 5 special stages, two more than the Frenchman. At the final finishing line, the Spaniard drew alongside his rival with a 3rd rally victory and a final lead of 15'04 in the general standings. Behind this duo, the battle for the last place on the podium witnessed a more than unpredictable conclusion. Comfortably sat in third, Francisco "Chaleco" Lopez had a lead of 43 minutes with 182 km of racing left. However the last special of the rally was a nightmare for the Chilean. A broken suspension arm knocked "Chaleco" off the podium. In his place came an incredulous Helder Rodrigues who, in addition to his special stage victory in Arica, allowed Yamaha to beat Aprilia. However, the Japanese constructor Yamaha was also in the spotlight, thanks to Jonah Street and his stage win in Copiapo. Another official brand also had its slice of the cake: the BMW team left the Dakar with two stage victories for Paulo Gonçalves in Iquique and Frans Verhoeven, its leading representative who finished 15th in the general standings.

A lot was expected of him and he did not disappoint: for his first participation, the three times winner of the Baja 1000, Quinn Cody, quickly learned the particularly specific skills of the rally-raid. The American, on a Honda which he only discovered in Buenos Aires just before the race, finished ten of the thirteen stages in the Top 15 (including two in the Top 10), completing the rally as the best rookie in 9th place with a very comfortable lead of 2 hours on the next man, Chilean Daniel Gouet. Admittedly, Cody did not do as well as David Frétygné, who finished 7th on his first Dakar in 2004, but has a promising future in the discipline. Another rookie, Spaniard Laia Sanz is not just a pretty face. The many times world trial champion, expertly coached and guided by the experienced Jordi Arcarons, triumphed in the women's race, finishing her first Dakar in 39th position. Hugo Payen claimed the distinction of being the leading rider in the bike-trunk category. Without the slightest assistance, the Frenchman finished in a very respectable 49th position.

Quads

Patronelli again, but not the same one. With a record number of participants (30), the quad race was set to be thrilling. The first news it made was the continuing saga of setbacks for title holder, Marcos Patronelli. Arriving on the rally in far from ideal shape after a training injury picked up at the end of November, misfortune kept on piling up for him over the first few days, before he eventually withdrew. An electrical fault before the start of the first special, then a fall combined with a new injury to his knee put paid to his ambitions. The absence of the boss gave hope to everyone on the special stages or in the general standings. As a result, the battle between the quads produced 4 different leaders of the general standings (Alejandro Patronelli, Tomas Maffei, Sebastian Halpern and Josef Machacek) and 7 different stage winners (Machacek, Patronelli, Maffei Halpern, Santamarina, Declerck and Laskawiec). Whilst from stage 8 onwards Alejandro Patronelli confirmed his place on the highest step, the fight for the other places on the podium was fierce until the very last stage, on which Lukas Laskawiec eventually overtook Christophe Declerck to steal the bronze medal from his grasp by 52 seconds. As for the only woman in the quad field, Camélia Liparoti finished in the top 10, a first on the rally.



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Cars

Al Attiyah wears them all down. Out of the three major favourites tipped at the start of the rally, the most resistant, most regular and most skilful was victorious, by maintaining a dazzling level of performance throughout the rally, whilst the others distanced themselves from the reckoning through repeated minor hiccups. As for the Volkswagen team, the competition was eliminated progressively.

Stephane Peterhansel represented the most realistic threat for the Race Touaregs, but the avalanche of punctures suffered by the X-Raid leader had quashed his hopes for victory by the rest day. A series of mishaps continued to slow his BMW X3, finally pushing him into fourth place, like last year. For many outsiders, the disappointment was much more brutal. Robby Gordon was never in mechanically good shape, and left the race after blowing the engine on his Hummer during a link stage. For the X-Raid team, the bitterest pill to swallow was the major slip-up made by Guerlain Chicherit, who had the unhappy distinction and bad taste to roll his Mini Countryman during a test session on the rest day.

Further woe befell the team with the Leonid Novitsky and Orlando Terranova exiting the rally when, in turn, they were both placed 7th in the general standings. However, Polish driver Krzysztof Holowczyc gave the team something to smile about by keeping his car in 5th position until Buenos Aires, behind 4 Dakar winners. On the return journey to Buenos Aires, the fight for the title only really involved two drivers: Nasser Al Attiyah and Carlos Sainz. Over the 5,000 kilometres of special stages left to cover, the two duellists, who were separated by the smallest of gaps at the finish last year, once again gave an impression of almost absolute equality on the tracks. However, a couple of brief moments in which "El Matador" lost his assurance were enough to exclude him from the defence of his title: between Antofagasta and Copiapo to begin with, where he became stuck for several precious minutes in the dunes, then on the way to San Juan, where his haste led his Race Touareg into a hole, breaking his suspension. Due to this incident, the Spaniard left an open road for Al Attiyah, even losing his second place to Giniel De Villiers. The 1-2-3 on the final podium for Volkswagen was almost accompanied by a clean sweep of the special stages: 12 stages out of 13 for the Race Touaregs, including 7 for Sainz, increasing his total to 24, one more than the previous record holder in the car category, Stephane Peterhansel. Looking down through the standings, we meet Mathias Kahle (10th), who was the quickest of the two-wheel drive buggies. Jun Mitsuhashi, in 12th position, won both the T2 Production vehicles category (with a lead of 15 hours over Frédéric Chavigny) and the alternative fuel challenge, the diesel in the tank of his Toyota having been replaced by recycled cooking oil. Finally, Brazilian driver Marlon Koerich was the best placed of the debutants on the rally, a nice present for a birthday that he celebrated on the return to Buenos Aires.

Trucks

Kamaz on top of the world. The main favourites for the truck race did not fail to live up to expectations. The race for a possible successor to Vladimir Chagin was said to be the most open and competitive of recent years, and indeed it was. But in the end, as is customary, the Kamaz trucks won.

Better still, they took all the places on the podium and, just to cap it all, reinforced their domination with 4th place in the general standings going to Ilgizar Mardeev. However, in descending order from the highest step on the podium, Vladimir Chagin, Firdaus Kabirov and Eduard Nikolaev, had to give it their all and may have even harboured doubts from time to time. This was because the entire armada of the other constructors and drivers that regularly compete in the Dakar, except for Hans Stacey, where in with a shout.

Yet, the official Man trucks, the Tatra, Iveco, Gifa and Hino had to face up one by one to the reality of the situation and give in. It is true that the blue Tartar fleet did benefit from the early withdrawal of Gerard de Rooy, on the very first stage, when the Dutch driver aggravated the injury that deprived him of the Dakar last year. Similarly, the withdrawal of Van Ginkel on this same initial timed section robbed the field of a genuine pretender for victory.

Afterwards, mechanical problems put paid to the hopes of Ales Loprais. The nephew of Karel Loprais was teamed up with a competitor on a comeback: Joseph Kalina, 62 years old and 4 victories as a navigator. The Czech team caused a sensation by bringing the long series of Kamaz stage victories (24 triumphs!) to a halt on stage 6 and repeated the achievement the next day. These two victories midway through the event were conducive to the emergence of doubt in the Kamaz clan. Nevertheless, mechanical problems then withdrawal crushed the hopes of seeing the supremacy of the Russians challenged. This did not stop the race keeping other promises, with second and third placed stage finishes for Pep Vila, or the 5th position in the general standings for Franz Echter. It was not sufficient, however, to change the course of history and prevent Vladimir Chagin from becoming the seven times winner of the event, a new record.