



Stage 12: The Countdown Has Started

With a third special stage victory on the Dakar 2010, Francisco Lopez has stolen a march in his combat with Pal-Anders Ullevalseter for 2nd place in the general standings, which are still dominated by Cyril Despres. Two days from the finish in Buenos Aires, Carlos Sainz slightly increased his lead over Nasser Al Attiyah, but the gap is still only 5'20''.

When they woke up this morning at the bivouac in San Juan, many of the bikers were not aware that the rankings for the previous day's stage had undergone somewhat of a change. Late yesterday evening, the race stewards had in fact given time bonuses to the riders who opened the road and fell foul of incorrect indications set up by an Argentinean policeman after 13 km. It was a blow for Frans Verhoeven who saw victory slip away from him without even clambering on his bike. In the end it went to Marc Coma, making it his third consecutive success. Another consequence, of greater importance, was that Pal Anders Ullevalseter, the second placed rider in the general standings, was rejoined by "Chaleco" Lopez, with both riders on exactly the same time.

As a result, the stakes in the 12th stage soon became focused on the fight for 2nd place, a battle played out over a matter of seconds between Lopez and Ullevalseter. The Norwegian rider was in the ascendancy on the first half of the route, which was quicker and better suited to the capacities of his 690cc KTM, even with the restrictor on. After 363 kilometres, he even boasted a lead of 1'34'' over his rival. However, during the sandy last 113 km to be covered, the little Aprilia belonging to "Chaleco" came into its own. At the finishing line, the Chilean won the fourth special stage of his career on the Dakar and the third this year. More importantly, he distanced Ullevalseter by 1'13''. With two stages left before the end of the Dakar, a point that Lopez has never reached in three attempts, the minutes have never been as precious.

With the room for manoeuvre that he has built up at the front of the race, Cyril Despres was in a position where losing a few minutes was not a problem. As a result, the leader of the general standings concentrated on keeping his bike on the track, whilst maintaining a pace that would not affect his concentration. At San Rafael, he arrived at the bivouac 17 minutes later than his nearest rival, but nonetheless with a reassuring lead of 1 hour 3 minutes.

At the start of the car race, Carlos Sainz surely must have thought back to the 12th stage of the Dakar 2009, during which he lost the race when he went brutally crashing off the tracks. At the time, his nearest pursuer was Giniel De Villiers. This year, the situation is slightly different with a wilder team-mate, Nasser Al Attiyah, trailing Sainz by 4'28'' before they got down to business this morning. With a virtuoso like Al Attiyah on his tail, the Spaniard had no means of controlling the situation. He started the race some way behind his rival, so the "Matador" had to go out and

conquer, and he did so, overtaking in particular Robby Gordon. Meanwhile, Al Attiyah had come across his former team-mate Guerlain Chicherit, who had ground to a halt after breaking the transmission on his BMW X3. The Qatari, who also overtook Orlando Terranova, was therefore forced into opening the road by the circumstances of the race. At the half-way point, the statistics were in Sainz's favour, since he had put in the best intermediate time, with a lead of 2'03'' over Peterhansel and more importantly 4'19'' over his "stable-mate".

However, on the second section of the special, Al Attiyah picked up the pace to such an extent that he was able to limit the damage and maintain the suspense. At the finishing line, he achieved the second best time of the day, only 52'' behind. Whilst there are still two stages left to complete the Dakar, it is on the stage leading to Santa Rosa that the "four-wheeled wild-man" will be lying in wait for Sainz. The sections of dunes in the first 50 kilometres of the special represent the last chance to knock the general standings leader of his perch.

source: www.dakar.com