



Stage 5: Tough Times For The Heavyweights!

Francisco Lopez wins a second special stage in his Dakar career in Chile once again and strategically places himself as the true challenger of Cyril Despres following him at 37'37'' in the standings after a gloom and doom stage for Casteu – who had to withdraw – and for Coma. In the car category, Stéphane Peterhansel drops down the standings. His misfortune is a blessing for Volkswagen with Mark Miller winning his first special stage on a Dakar and Sainz taking the lead in the standings.

In sport it is often said that success is something you can force. In the Antofagasta stage, it is a long and steady preparation, a whole biker's life that has paid off for Francisco Lopez. Last year, he won the first stage in Chile that had taken the raid to Valparaiso. He was riding a 690cc KTM back then. This year "Chaleco" was hired by Aprilia to try the 450cc adventure. Riding his new machine, the Chilean had no problem finding the familiar feel of the bike. It was already on a small Honda bike that he had made his debut in the rally raid winning e.g. the world champion title in 2006. Even if he only discovered his new ride at the Pharaohs Rally, Lopez is now quite comfortable riding it all the more so that the tracks on today's menu are the ones he trained on. With the experience acquired, he will now have to also confirm that he can get to the top of the standings... provided he finishes it for the first time in his life.

At any rate, podium prospects are getting closer for Lopez and for others because the road to Antofagasta was a real nightmare for the leaders. First, Marc Coma damaged his rear wheel then he lost half an hour before getting the wheel of Italian rider Luca Manca. This courteous – but hard to understand – gesture allowed the title holder to limit the damage but he is now 1h16'55'' behind Despres, who spent his day with "Chaleco". Their pace was also the pace of David Casteu, then second in the overall standings but then came km 395 where the Sherco rider fell pretty badly. The stage ended abruptly for him with a broken leg and a helicopter transfer back to the bivouac: it is the first time Casteu has to withdraw in seven Dakar participations.

In the car category Volkswagen cleared the way in a rather radical fashion and finishes with a first stage victory on the Dakar for Mark Miller, a triple stage victory with VW at all first, second and third places and a provisional podium entirely monopolized by the Race Touareg with a pretty safe margin between them and their main rivals at the start of the raid. The US driver has missed several stage victories e.g. in 2009 the year he finished second of the rally. This is now ancient history with his victory in Antofagasta, not at the heart of the sand dunes he likes so much but on a fast track route where he was able to beat his team mates Carlos Sainz (2nd at 2'10'') and Nasser Al Attiyah (3rd at 4'27''). Moreover Sainz's Race Touareg is now taking center stage of the rally with a 4'37'' lead over his Qatari team mate and a 9'39'' lead over Miller. Beyond those three, Robby Gordon is ranking fourth but 59'55'' behind Sainz.

If VW strategy for supremacy worked this well, it was also with a little help from destiny that almost completely eliminated Stéphane Peterhansel from the list of potential raid winners. The BMW X-3 had declared itself THE car to beat since the encouragingly easy Fiambala victory. But at km 135 of today's special stage, the favorite became a distant outsider following the rupture of his transmission axle. The triple Dakar winner first stopped for over 50 minutes. Then further on, he got stuck again for another 25 minutes. In total the delay accumulated by "Peter" on this stage might be of over 2 hours. Putting him insurmountably far from the top of the standings.

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