



Stage 7: Despres Is The Boss; Al-Attiyah Asserts His Position

Before the day of rest that the Dakar will be spending in Antofagasta on the coast of the Pacific Ocean, Cyril Despres wins a stage in which Marc Coma has returned to being his fiercest contender in the overall standings. In the car category the day's stage won by Al-Attiyah also allowed the BMW X-3 of Guerlain Chicherit and Stéphane Peterhassel to reposition themselves in 4th and 5th places in the overall standings. With a sixth stage victory in seven stages, Vladimir Chagin is more than ever THE race leader.

Some stages can represent – alone – several episodes of a race. The stage taking the Dakar contenders to Antofagasta today – with its 600 km of special stage – was precisely a mix of different terrains and led to many events. Marc Coma and Cyril Despres who had started first paid the price – for a while – of their hesitations in a vast sand dunes area. The riders behind them ended up catching up. At the different intermediary check points both two-times winners ended up losing ground and giving opportunities to Ullevalseter (1st at CP1 and CP2), Frégné (1st at CP4) and Lopez (1st at CP5 and CP6).

But in the last 150 km the two masters of the bike race ended up growing the gap on the track again and got back to their natural positions. Time then for a good game play between France and Spain... 20 km from the finish, Coma took the lead for just 10 short seconds. But in the grand finale, despite the pain inflicted by a broken shock absorber earlier on, Cyril Despres crossed the finish line with the best time of the day and won his 22nd stage on a Dakar keeping at the same time – and more importantly – the lead in the overall standings 1h06 ahead of Coma, who he relevantly identified as his prime contender. The Spaniard who is now ahead of Helder Rodrigues and “Chaleco” in the standings has achieved the easiest part of the mission he has identified for himself since his engine problems and the penalty he was given. The fight will go on after the off day.

The longest stage of the rally promised to be a great fight in the car category too. Indeed competition is getting harsher inside the Volkswagen team where all three drivers on the podium all see themselves as legitimate potential title winners. Between Carlos Sainz, Nasser Al Attiyah and Mark Miller, a struggle mixing psychology and performance is starting to appear. Today the Qatari, the newcomer in the team, let his will power express itself as well as his driving skills on the track. After starting fourth, the “wonderfully crazy driver” passed Mark Miller, who seemed to want to resist being passed in the sand dunes; then he passed Carlos Sainz. With this sixth stage victory of his career, Al-Attiyah gets closer to Sainz in the overall standings just 11'03'' shy of the leader.

Despite their dominant position the Race Touareg are not entirely rid of the BMW menace. First, Stéphane Peterhansel, who was opening the road today, demonstrated

once again that he was full of resources. The Frenchman started by winning all best times at the intermediary CPs. He then drove on easily towards the finish line where he was beaten by Al-Attiyah probably due to a small navigation error on his part. Then later, Guerlain Chicherit, who had managed to make people forget about the last few days, positioned himself right behind the Volkswagen pack in the standings as he gained enough time to pass Krzysztof Holowczyc, then Carlos Sousa (supported by Mathieu Baumel, Chicherit's former co-pilot!). For the multiple champion of freestyle skiing, the podium is however still 1h40' away.

In the truck category, Vladimir Chagin remains the master of the standings and of the raid; he even slightly reinforces his position on a stage that was perfect to widen the gaps. He put even more distance between him and his teammate Firdaus Kabirov, who remains his main contender but is ranking second ...1h03' behind the leader. Moreover, the duel Chagin started with Stéphane Peterhansel for the absolute record in stage victories goes on. On the evening of the Antofagasta (act II), it is now deuce between the Frenchman and the Russian: 53 stage victories each!

source: www.dakar.com