



Stage 9: Coma's sprint finish, Al Attiyah claws his way back

The 9th stage of the Dakar was like an exciting sprint finish between the rally favourites. Although the first ten to finish yesterday started side-by-side, Marc Coma was the quickest over the 170-km route. The Catalan picked up the 10th special stage victory of his Dakar career by beating general standings leader Cyril Despres by only 4 seconds. In the car race, the day belonged to Nasser Al Attiyah, the day's winner, who clawed back nearly 6 minutes on rally leader Carlos Sainz.

The stage was shorter but no less difficult for the competitors in the Dakar, with an especially spectacular start side-by-side for the best 10 finishers the day before. They were then followed by the rest of the riders in waves of 20. Very soon, Marc Coma took control, leading the pack over the 170-km route almost entirely made up of the dunes around Copiapo. In the dunes, the Catalan tried to leave the other race favourites in his wake... in vain. In fact, at CP1 (at the 117-km point), it was the general standings leader Cyril Despres who put in the best time, with a lead of only 4 seconds over Coma and 20'' over Pal-Anders Ullevalseter, now the nearest rival to the French race leader.

Coma once again "stepped on the gas" in the last part of the special and the combat with his eternal rival Cyril Despres lasted right up to the finishing line. Title holder Coma had the last word, beating the Frenchman by only 4 seconds. Yesterday's stage winner, Francisco "Chaleco" Lopez found it difficult on his Aprilia 450cc to follow the pace imposed by the big KTMs. Nonetheless, the Chilean finished his day in 3rd position, 1'14 behind the day's winner.

As a result, Marc Coma joins the very exclusive club of 14 bikers who have won at least ten special stages. The Catalan still remains far behind Cyril Despres who boasts 22 triumphs and even further behind the record holder on a bike, Stéphane Peterhansel with his 33 victories. In the general standings, Despres now has a lead of 1 hour 21 minutes over Ullevalseter and 1 hour 25 minutes over Lopez.

Whilst the bike race witnessed a close sprint, the car race saw more incidents but with bigger gaps. Yesterday's winner Stéphane Peterhansel opened the road followed by a quartet of Volkswagens led by general standings leader Carlos Sainz. As planned by the VW clan, Giniel De Villiers, now a 'top-of-the-range water carrier' soon let his colleague Al Attiyah overtake him, to provide assistance to the blue car team 'just in case'.

Stéphane Peterhansel achieved the best time at the 31-km point and was leading the dance, but then suffered in the "untidy" dunes of the Atacama. These irregular dunes made the Frenchman's life very complicated. As a result, he had lost at least a quarter of an hour by CP1. Another significant point was the all out attack by Nasser Al Attiyah, second in the general standings and seeking the first place held by his team-

mate but rival all the same Carlos Sainz. At CP1, the Qatari had already struck a big blow, regaining 6'30 on the native of Madrid, who suffered a puncture and got slightly lost at one point. Al Attiyah did not let his pace drop until the finishing line, where he grabbed his 3rd triumph this year. Although Sainz reduced the gap somewhat by the end of the 170-km stage, he still lost 5'59 to his closest rival for the lead, which just goes to show that with VW, there are no team instructions.

In the general standings, "El Matador" now has a lead of 8'36 over Al Attiyah. Peterhansel keeps his 4th place, but is gradually being caught by his team-mate Guerlain Chicherit, who finished 4th today and is now less than quarter of an hour behind his illustrious colleague in the BMW X-Raid team.

The triumphal march of the Kamaz team continues in the truck race. Firdaus Kabirov put a stop to a series of wins by Vladimir Chagin, after the "Tsar's" three consecutive victories. The title holder won with a lead of 4'41 over the five times winner of the Dakar and more than 14' over Frenchman Joseph Adua. In the general standings, Chagin can see his rivals coming with a significant lead of 1 hour and 11 minutes.

source: www.dakar.com