

AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY — MAGAZINE

A lesson in self-sacrifice

It was an extenuating day. Wednesday saw the competitors tackle the 241.1 km long queen stage of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally with, as usual, plenty of dunes on the menu. The stage ended at a bivouac in the middle of the desert. Today was the first half of the marathon stage, which leaves competitors without their assistance crews. Although solidarity will be key, the marathon stage does not scare Daniel Albero, the first diabetic participant in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally, or Éric Croquelois, who has already taken part in the Dakar eight times in the motorbike category and is using this race to discover the joys of Side by Side racing.

STORY OF THE DAY. Daniel Albero, stronger than pain

He is a biker like any other. Daniel Albero is delighted to take part in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. "I would've never thought that one day I'd get to race in such a prestigious rally", says the Spaniard. Daniel Albero has had diabetes since age 10, which requires him to constantly watch his blood sugar levels. "As a kid, it was tough because I wasn't allowed to practise sports at school or in a club. The same happened when I tried to sign up for bike races." The bus driver from Valencia, a real jack-of-all-trades who is equally capable of riding a motorbike and playing music, is determined to forge ahead. "I want to show everyone that people with diabetes can make their dreams come true, just like everyone else." His dream is the Dakar, where he hopes to become the first diabetic competitor. "Racing in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally is already a huge satisfaction, a golden opportunity to show what I'm made of. It's crazy how much you can learn about the nuances of rally raids here." Daniel also feels the weight of his "great responsibility" towards all the people who see themselves in him or come to him for advice. "I can't afford to forget about my treatment for a single second when out on the tracks, but I feel freer than ever."

THE COMEBACK KID. "Croquette" surfs the dunes again!

The fatigue of three days of racing has failed to wipe the smile from Éric Croquelois' face. The driver from northern France, who has started the Dakar fifteen times on a motorbike, had not raced in rally raids for two years. A nasty fall in Bolivia in 2016 left him with a fractured hand and four broken ribs. However, he has put that experience behind him: "Croquette", as he is known, is now having fun at the wheel of one of the 32 Side by Side buggies in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. "I'm having an absolute blast out there", he confesses. "It's easier to go up the dunes than on a bike!" After watching the last Dakar from the sidelines, Éric seems to have caught a second wind. Back in the laid-back atmosphere of the canteen, he speaks to other riders with the right words for each of them. He seems to change his mind: "I was getting too old for motorbikes. Racing in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally in a Side by Side? We decided to sign up a fortnight ago, with my brother-in-law as the co-driver."

He is still beaming as he moves up the learning curve, but he has had his share of bad luck: "We chose the wrong settings and ended up rolling over in the first stage. Fortunately enough, the only casualty was a rear-view mirror." Another competitor lent them a hand to help get them back on their way. The next day it was their turn to help out another competitor who had also flipped his vehicle, as well as a few bikers who had lost their bearings. "You could say we're the St Bernards of this rally", chuckles "Croquette", who is pleased to ease back into the routine of a rally raid in such "a jaw-dropping setting". The experience has left the man from northern France all fired-up and eager to sign up for the Dakar in this category. "I probably will. The Afriquia Merzouga Rally makes you want to race one day after the other!"

FIGURE OF THE DAY: 39

KTM is fielding the largest contingent in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. 39 of the 124 bikers in the race are competing on a machine from the Austrian maker. Yamaha is the second most popular brand, with 12 motorbikes, 8 quads and 9 Side by Side, for a total of 19 vehicles. A further 11 competitors are riding Husqvarna motorbikes and 7 are racing on Honda motorbikes.

Q&A. How can you succeed in a marathon stage?

Edo Mossi, the creator of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally, runs the evening courses given to competitors after each stage: "Preparation is essential. You need to spend weeks training back home to understand everything about your vehicle and develop your mechanical knowledge. The days before the race should be spent double-checking everything to avoid surprises on D Day. If you leave anything to chance, it will come back to haunt you. You also need to respect and take care of your vehicle, and that means not being reckless. If you damage a tyre, you'll have pressure issues the next day, if you break something, you'll be forced to cope with it, so you have to be as cautious as possible."

FOCUS ON... The key role of Afriquia, 2M, Ain Soltane, Sigecont and Naviera Armas

Afriquia is the title sponsor of the event for the third year running. The Moroccan company supplies competitors with fuel and oil throughout the rally and provides essential logistical support. "It's a strong, widely recognised brand that boosts the quality and prestige of the rally", stresses Afriquia Merzouga Rally sponsor manager Alejandro de Goycoechea. The event also boasts a wide range of official suppliers: KTM, present alongside its factory team; Moroccan company Ain Soltane, which supplies 12,000 litres of water throughout the Merzouga Rally; Sigecont, an Italian business specialising in public works; and the Spanish shipping company Naviera Armas, which transfers the vehicles from Europe to Morocco. 2M, the leading media group in Morocco, is also making its debut as a partner of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. As the official rally broadcaster, 2M offers a cross-cutting package ranging from TV footage and Internet coverage to social networks.

For more information, visit the rally's website www.merzougarally.com

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