

Merzouga, 17th of April 2018

AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY

Benavides strikes again!

The stakes keep getting higher at the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. After yesterday's 206.71 km opener, the competitors tackled a 175.30 km stage with two lengthy loops crossing massive fields of dunes. The combination of heat (with the mercury hitting 30 °C), navigational challenges and soft sand demanded a laser-like focus from amateurs and pros alike. The winner of the prologue on Sunday, Kevin Benavides (Honda), won today's stage in the motorbike category, as did Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) in the quad race and Casey Currie (Can-Am) in the SxS competition.

Key points:

- Stage 2 took the competitors through a 206.71 km course
- Kevin Benavides (Honda) claimed today's stage after winning the prologue on Sunday
- The Argentinian beat Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) and Toby Price (KTM)
- Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) and Casey Currie (South Racing Can-Am) triumphed in the quad and Side by Side categories
- Tomorrow, the first part of the marathon stage will take the rally to a bivouac in the middle of the desert after 241.1 km of racing

Although the Afriquia Merzouga Rally aims to be a race for amateurs to hone their skills in before signing up for the world's biggest rally raids, the rally held in southern Morocco is far from being a walk in the park, even for the pros. "The road books are really difficult, with up to four notes in just one kilometre", stresses American biker Ricky Brabec (Honda). "Making a mistake is easy, and this can cost you dearly in the general classification", adds Axel Dutrie (Yamaha), the winner of the quad stage.

The elite competitors really kicked it up a notch on Tuesday. "The winners were much faster than we expected", admits the race control team. Kevin Benavides prevailed in the intense battle in the motorbike category. Having already claimed the 5 km prologue on Sunday, the Argentinian earned Honda its second victory in as many days after Joan Barreda won yesterday's stage. He outgunned Chile's Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna, + 2'16"), who had already finished on the podium yesterday (3rd), and Toby Price (KTM). In the quad category, Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) bounced back after losing 33 minutes due to a navigation mistake on Monday. The Frenchman won the stage ahead of Jérémy Forestier and Antoine Vitse, also riding Yamaha quads. Finally, American Casey Currie (Can-Am) won the Side by Side stage.

PROVISIONAL STAGE 2 CLASSIFICATION: MOTORBIKES

- 1- Kevin Benavides (Yamaha) 3 h 14'58"
- 2- Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) + 2'16"
- 3- Toby Price (KTM) + 3'41"
- 4- Franco Caimi (Yamaha) + 7'42"
- 5- Ignacio Cornejo (Honda) + 8'10"

SIDE BY SIDE

- 1- Currie Casey (Can-Am) 3h28'03"
- 2- Frederic Henricy (Polaris) + 18'22"
- 3- Carlos Checa (Polaris) + 23'15"

QUADS

- 1- Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) 4 h 01'05"
- 2- Jérémy Forestier (Yamaha) + 10'58"
- 3- Antoine Vitse (Yamaha) + 13'24"

QUOTES

Kevin Benavides (Honda, 1st): "It was a fantastic stage. It's Honda's third win since the start of the rally [including the prologue he won on Sunday and Joan Barreda's victory yesterday], so all that hard work is paying off. I attacked a lot today, but I had to ease up towards the end of the stage because I was running out of petrol. Now we'll work to get the bike ready for tomorrow's marathon stage."

Franco Caimi (Yamaha, 4th): "I'm not too pleased with how the stage went. It was very difficult, especially the start of the second part. To make matters worse, the pace was very high today. Our settings weren't right and that also cost me some time. Fortunately, there's still three days to go!"

Joan Barreda (Honda, 6th): "My wrist still hurts after undergoing surgery in February. Today was difficult. I lost some time wandering around looking for a waypoint. I hope tomorrow will be better for me. I'll start from a better position, so I hope to claw back a few minutes and move up in the general classification."

Ricky Brabec (Honda, 7th): "I've been nursing a headache since yesterday and had to take some medicines before the start. It was another gruelling stage, especially on the navigational front. There are places where it is hard to tell tracks apart, with so many competitors and spectators! But I'm still happy to be here, I love this rally! Tomorrow we'll face some fast stony tracks. I like this kind of terrain. I hope I can do something nice."

TOMORROW'S PROGRAMME. Pushing the body to the limit!

Competitors would be well-advised to rest this evening ahead of stage 3. At a length of 241.1 km, the queen stage of the Afrika Merzouga Rally is also the longest one. Following a 63 km liaison, the rally will face a sequence of dune fields before reaching a bivouac in the middle of the desert. It is the first part of the marathon stage, where competitors will have to make do without their assistance crews. Solidarity will therefore be essential to repair the machines and recover before stage 4 on the following day.

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

Press contact

Maria Guidotti

maria@mariaguidotti.com / pressedakar@aso.fr