



THE DAKAR CHALLENGE

I owe Valentino Rossi big time. If it wasn't for Rossi's flat out commitment on a GP bike I would never have watched a seemingly innocuous advert during a Moto GP race late last year and would have missed out on the single most incredible experience of my motorsport career so far.

The advert, like so many on Eurosport, pointed me towards their website for more details of a competition called the Dakar Challenge, where one lucky rally crew would win a drive on the Dakar rally with Nissan Motorsport.

Typical of my last minute style of organisation, I looked the day before the competition deadline, when I had a truckload of work on already. The competition required extensive entry information on everything from your results in the sport to your ability with spanners and knowledge of GPS navigation; not something which was going to take 5 minutes. So I sat there for the whole day, fending off all other work deadlines, thinking of every last reason why they should pick me to be one of the final 10 crews in the competition.

The date of the announcement of the finalists came. I had considered carefully whether in a Europe wide competition we had the amount of experience required to make the final and ever the optimist, hoped we might just make the cut.

By 8pm I guessed we were out of luck, donned my coat and was heading out of the door for a consolation beer, when the phone rang. In the fantastic way our friends over the channel speak English, 'Raphael' congratulated me on being selected to represent Great Britain in the semi final of the Dakar Challenge! I rang my co-driver Danny Pearce to give him the good news; cue a few celebratory beers...

An early start was required the next morning with only a week until Danny and I would travel to the mountains of Southern France for the semi final of the competition. The list of the final 10 crews lead like a who's who of European motorsport; JWRC regular Luca Betti, Ford WRC test driver and FIA B seed Tobias Johansson, formula BMW front runner Stian Sørliie, the list went on. We needed to raise our game so set aside 2 days to practice anything we could think of.

We ran a timed kilometre, practised timed wheel changes, thought of answers to possible

questions, re-learned how to use a compass, watched the Dakar DVD the organisers sent us and Googled all our competitors. The one's we hadn't recognised were racing drivers or experienced 'Baja' drivers, doing nothing to set our minds at rest! Finally we contacted Patsy Quick, an experienced Dakar motorbike rider in our area who lent us some old Dakar road books, all written in French. 'Je Voudrais un baguette' wasn't going to help me here; curse my GCSE French teacher!

The journey to Clermont Ferrand in France was an education in itself. Arriving at the coach pickup point in Paris following a Eurostar breakfast, our competitors were gathered from 10 different European countries, all with the obligatory Sparco bags! After much opposition sizing up, we did the typically British thing of taking the back seats on the coach and setting off on a 6 hour journey south.

The enormity of the situation finally dawned when we met the director from Eurosport towards the end of our journey. In an understated European style he told us to ignore the cameras and just 'do your life' as you would normally. This seemed fine until we unlocked our hotel room door and found a camera crew lurking in the dark! There were 7 camera crews in all and they were everywhere, giving absolutely no space to relax or discuss the coming challenges. Our

briefing in the hotel left no doubt that it would be a challenge either, as we were told in no uncertain terms to enjoy the hotel as we would not sleep well for the next 48 hours.

Morning soon came (6am) and we were all handed our Dakar Challenge clothing including sponsor laden shirts and jackets and the all important team bibs, ours in delightful pink with Union Jacks and a simple 'driver' or 'co-driver' printed in large black letters. An hour drive into the mountains and the feeling of altitude hit home immediately, it was cold, very windy and shorter on oxygen than we were used to. Our kilometre run at sea level felt a bit pointless!

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First activity was 21km bike ride, entirely off road, up and down the mountain twice, navigating off a compass and a very simple map. It was devastating for me; I pride myself on being physically fit and fell at the first hurdle. With a combination of nerves and altitude, we set off at two minute intervals, with us leaving last, and caught no-one, despite riding so hard I was actually vomiting as we crossed the finish line. What we didn't know at the time was that many of the other teams had suffered penalties for getting lost or missing checkpoints. It was the psychological pressure of not knowing the results that would be the hardest to overcome; we were pushing to our absolute limit and no idea if it was enough.

The afternoon consisted of a GPS navigation exam, which we fared well in, and then an off road trial in a short wheelbase Nissan Patrol. Being team 10, we were last to go on each activity and several teams had disappeared for an awful long time, accompanied by shouting and engines bouncing off the rev limiter in the distance. Tobias Johansson from the Swedish team came across to me and simply said: "last to go, yes?" then walked away.

I needn't have worried in the end as I'd visited one of my employers, Ian Wright, who is multiple British trials driving champion, before we left. With his advice ringing through my ears, and Danny outside the car to guide us over the particularly difficult sections, we flew through the course for a top 3 result.

As darkness fell we were paired with the Italian team of Luca Betti and his co-driver, for a team

4x4 marsh and river crossing with a few extra tools, including rope and some sand ladders, which are basically corrugated plates of metal and fibreglass used to extract cars stuck in the sand. Luca's co-driver didn't speak any English, so with a 4 way multi language shouting match going on, we got the car stuck 1 minute into our 20 minute slot. And it didn't come out for almost an hour; last place for both teams on the activity.

Soaking wet and cold, we headed to a stone built building on top of the mountain for some food, and then straight off to another barn where the boss of the NISMO Dakar team awaited us. In the barn was a Dakar 'chase car', with 3 faults to be found using basic clues in the pitch black using 2 head torches. Despite being tired and wet, we found all three in just a couple of minutes, a good bit of damage limitation.

Fog had dropped on the mountain as midnight approached, so the organisers dropped a planned night time navigation in favour of a 3km cross country run to our overnight camp. The teams were soon spread out, with us in the middle of the pack and the super fit Scandinavians up front. My co-driver Danny could have run considerably faster without me, but we were aware one of the core values of the competition was teamwork. Unfortunately for the German team, this teamwork appeared to be lacking, and the female co-driver went missing around the halfway point. She had taken a wrong turn down the mountain and had a nasty fall, twisting her knee and ankle. One of the Dutch pair had an asthma attack; the ongoing challenge was taking it's toll.

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In heavy rain we erected our tent at 1am and attempted to sleep. It was so cold that we had to sleep rather closer together than we would normally be comfortable with, and through the short night the rain built up to a 3 inch puddle at the bottom of the tent. We were awoken by a truck horn at 5am, donned our wet boots and were immediately sent on an 8km run down and then back up the mountain. Considering my total lack of ability when it comes to running, with a lot of encouragement from Danny we were pleased to finish 6th, gaining on the crews in 4th and 5th.

A medical examination followed breakfast, and then finally the last assessment, the speed

driving test, to be carried out in buggies similar to those used in the Race of Champions, on a mud ridden gravel circuit. I was on my own for this and well aware of the need for a good result to guarantee a place in the final and a trip to Morocco. Knowing that your efforts will be broadcast on Eurosport adds to the pressure; a poor time would require an excellent page from the driver's book of excuses!

Strict instructions were given by the judges; be tidy, consistent, fast and do not touch any cone or barrier on the course to remain in the competition. A fine balance, and one which I didn't know the result of until a month later when we watched the TV show in our local pub. We were third, one tenth of a second off the Spanish team in 2nd, and a little further back from Tobias Johansson, but considerably faster than the other crews, including Luca Betti whom I had considered a chief rival in the standings.

The judging panel, including previous Dakar winner Kenjiro Shinozouka, took over 2 hours to decide on the 5 teams to go to the final in Morocco. Large tickets were handed to 4 of the first 8 teams; Spain, Norway, Sweden and Portugal. Left at the end of the line were us and the Italians, with only one ticket to the final, and all 7 cameras focused on us. Never again will I take the mickey out of finalists in X-Factor; the wait felt like a lifetime, but it was worth it. We were in the final, to travel to Morocco the following week!

We had few brief days in the UK to celebrate, and also for me to try and improve my lacklustre fitness, especially with regard to running. I ran every day, improving both my distance and





my speed with Danny as training partner. We researched GPS navigation and the location of our final, a particularly sparse area of Morocco near to the Algerian border. Sadly we couldn't locate a desert in Sussex to practice our sand driving, but covered the theory with Ian Wright again.

Our return to Paris was fantastic fun, with Eurosport having organised a sightseeing trip for the final 5 crews. The Dakar is huge in France, organised by the same team who run cycling's Tour de France. Walking down the Champs-Élysées in Dakar Challenge jackets with 4 camera crews was an amazing experience, akin (I guess?!) to being famous, with people staring and shouting good luck as we passed. We also attended the Dakar Press Conference and were sat with all the manufacturer drivers, were introduced to the press and finally saw the vehicle we would use if we won, a NISMO prepared long wheelbase Nissan Patrol.

The journey to Morocco was epic, starting at 9am in Paris, we flew to Casablanca, then to Marrakech and finally to Ouarzazate for around 9pm. We were then squeezed into 2 ancient transit minibuses with our bags strapped to the roof for a 5 hour drive into the middle of nowhere, an old French military town called Erfoud. As we checked into a hotel for one night it was a familiar story; we were told to dress for running and be outside at 5am, in three hours time.

Before sun up, Danny and I went running, for 8km using only a compass for navigation, over sand dunes. We laughed to each other as we ran about how absurd it felt to be running

through a desert at sunrise, whilst keeping a watchful eye on the point on the mountains on the horizon we were using as our bearing. Our research into desert navigation and my training whilst at home paid off; we won this first crucial trial outright.

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It was amazing to see the reaction of the other competitors to us winning the first trial; they had clearly thought we were an outside chance and we had immediately laid our hand on the table. Having spent some time in Paris with the other crews we had learned some interesting things about our competitors. Spain and Portugal had both driven on sand before, but it was Tobias Johansson who caused the most concern.

He had completed the entire WRC twice, in a WRC car. He had completed thousands of kilometres of testing for Ford in the Focus WRC. Most interesting to me was that he had government backing, used the same sports psychologist as Swedish Olympic Gold medalist Carolina Kruft and that an Italian doctor dealt with his fitness and diet. He even admitted to me that he could see I was under pressure in France and had deliberately asked if I was 'last to go?' to increase said pressure; playing a totally

different ball game to mine. It was good to see the shoe on the other foot.

We spent the rest of the day training to drive on sand and soft gravel, followed by a 7km drive where our speed was to be assessed over various terrain, with an emphasis on looking after the car. With hindsight we were too cautious with our approach in comparison to Tobias; he was considerably faster where we had looked after the car. The evening was rounded off with a 4km night run over sand dunes using flashing emergency beacons for navigation. All the teams ran together to avoid losing anyone, which ruined the test as anything meaningful, but went down well with the organisers for 'team spirit', another Dakar value.

After another cold night under canvas, just two more activities awaited us; a digging out trial, to see who could remove their car from deep sand fastest, and a sand driving trial. The former went well for us, finishing just shy of those pesky Swede's again! The latter was more of a challenge as sand was a totally alien surface to me. Deep sand, in high sand dunes with no recce of the route, just trials gates to follow.

The Spanish and Swedish teams both 'cleaned' the course; remarkable as the judging panel, including 3 experienced sand drivers, had all got stuck practicing the route! Me and Danny were stuck twice, but extracted the car both times in a matter of minutes. The Portuguese and Norwegian teams both got stuck fast and finished long over the time limit, their challenge was over. We knew the Spaniards had faired badly on all the navigation tests; it was between us and Tobias and Bo from Sweden.

Four hours wait is a long time at the best of times, but on this occasion it was unbearable. We were exhausted and had given our all; we just hoped that the judges preferred our Dakar style endurance approach to Tobias's WRC flat out approach. The pause was as long as for the semi final in France, but the result was crushing. We were second. Reserve crew for the Dakar rally. After a few hours of crying into our Moroccan supplied beer, (not very nice beer either, and pricey too!) we perked up a bit as the organisers had decided that as we had run so close to the winners, we should stay with NISMO in Morocco and complete the Dakar training program. The experience was incredible to say the least.

Our first day was spent training the co-drivers for Dakar style road books. Imagine a tulip style road book for a 450km stage, an encyclopaedia of directions. At some points there are boxes and boxes of information about vast expanses

of gravel interspersed with dangerous dry river crossings and at others, a simple heading for the GPS and a distance of 100km over sand dunes.

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We covered 115km of one last years Dakar stages, flat out, in a convoy of Nissan pick up trucks. You rely totally on your co-driver calling the exact distance to the next crest or dried up river; even when you have visibility it is almost impossible to pick up obstacles in the distance in a horizon of nothing. As a measure of how tough the day was, the camera crew following us with a local 'expert' sheared a wheel off in the middle of the nowhere, taking 6 hours for NISMO to recover him.

The second day was spent driving in the western most part of the Sahara desert at the Merzouga Erg, a vast region of mainly sand. I can only describe the view from an altitude of 800 metres on a mountain made entirely of sand as mind blowing, like being at the top of a ski resort entirely covered in brown snow! Driving on sand was an entirely new and very

enjoyable experience, everything based on momentum and line, reading the surface and choosing the correct gear.

When it goes wrong you have to work incredibly quickly as a crew; on the crest of a dune you can only see down your side and making the call as to which way to bail out of a manoeuvre is a difficult (but fun!) skill to master. Our local expert driver unfortunately rolled the camera car down a dune here...mental note not to accept lift home with Moroccan expert drivers!

The final day was spent testing the rally raid car, which was bizarre to drive in comparison to normal rally cars, a huge learning experience. 2 and a half tonnes of car, with a 450 litre fuel tank mounted from floor to ceiling directly behind the crew, along with 3 huge and heavy

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spare wheels, sand ladders, spades, water and an onboard compressor. The weight was most noticeable when giving the car a big 'send', the result being a monster slide with an almost roll effect added on top! Despite the weight it was

impressive on sand, with a huge amount of torque hauling the car over the dunes.

And so the adventure came to an end. We travelled back to Paris, ate a huge fast food meal and went home. We appeared on local TV, in motorsport press, on websites and of course for 3 and a half hours on Eurosport, which was a fantastic way to relive the entire experience. The pressure had been immense but we had dealt with it, beating everyone except Tobias and Bo. We had exceeded our own expectations for our performance and impressed NISMO, one of the most famous and successful Dakar Rally Raid teams.

I followed the 2006 Dakar with intense interest; Tobias was withdrawn on day 6 with the chassis irreparably damaged. Both Danny and I felt (a little selfishly we know!) relieved, as we felt we had taken the correct approach all along. One day, when the funds allow, we fully intend to prove our point by travelling all the way to Dakar as a part of the most challenging motorsport event on the planet, to finally finish our incredible journey.

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