

1–2 lead for Audi at the halfway point of the 2024 Dakar Rally

- **Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz lead ahead of Mattias Ekström/Emil Bergkvist**
- **Excitement, variety and a balanced field characterize the rally**
- **Terrain, distances and navigation place the highest demands**

Neuburg a. D. Donau, January 13, 2024 – At the halfway point of the Dakar Rally, Team Audi Sport can look back on its best performance to date: In its third participation in the desert classic, Audi with the Spaniards Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz ahead of the Swedes Mattias Ekström/Emil Bergkvist holds a one-two lead after six of twelve legs. In a particularly demanding edition of the world’s toughest desert rally, the innovative Audi RS Q e-tron stands out thanks to the efficiency of its electric drive and its outstanding reliability over the first 4,200 kilometers.

Rugged surfaces ranging from volcanic rock to scree, strenuous dune crossings in the Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia and two two-day marathon stages with little or no service opportunities: “As announced, the 46th edition of the Dakar Rally is absolutely relentless,” says Head of Audi Motorsport Rolf Michl. “I am all the more impressed by what we have seen so far from Team Audi Sport and Q Motorsport. Thanks to determination, hard work, a cohesive team performance by everyone involved and clever tactics, Carlos with Lucas and Mattias with Emil are in front now in their Audi RS Q e-tron cars.”

Six different stage winners from the prologue to the sixth stage, four lead changes as well as dramatic setbacks for several favourites characterize an exciting and completely open edition of the Dakar Rally. The stages on the first three legs alone were more than 400 kilometers long. After the victory of Mattias Ekström/Emil Bergkvist in the prologue, the Audi driver pairings continued their best performances. Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz took over a top position with second place on the first leg. The following day, Frenchman Stéphane Peterhansel, navigated by Edouard Boulanger, achieved his 50th personal car stage win in another Audi, adding to 33 from his motorcycle days. Sainz/Cruz simultaneously took the lead for one day and remained consistently in the top three until the fifth leg, while Ekström/Bergkvist followed directly behind in fourth place.

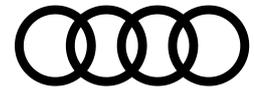
The big turning point was the 48H Chrono stage on leg 6 immediately before the rest day in Riyadh. It was spread over Thursday and Friday and covered 547 stage kilometers and 765 kilometers in total. In the dune mountains, the average speed dropped from previously more than 110 km/h to just 74 km/h. The stage did not allow any external service. Drivers and co-drivers were also separated from the teams overnight and had to rely on themselves. In order to avoid having to open the stage through the sandy mountains in the Empty Quarter, numerous top teams made tactical decisions the day before, as the respective stage result determines the

starting positions on the following day. The three Audi driver teams also voluntarily drove several minutes slower. “Of course, we didn’t know whether this tactic would work, but it paid off in the end,” said Sven Quandt, Team Principal of Q Motorsport. “Our drivers carried out the tasks perfectly, only Stéphane was a bit unlucky. Even though they didn’t win the stage, two of our three driver pairings are doing very well overall with the 1–2 lead. Our thanks also go to the team for their hard and good work.”

The 48H Chrono stage took its toll. While leader Yazeed Al Rajhi rolled his Toyota, Prodrive driver Nasser Al-Attiyah, one of the other favorites, lost 2.45 hours due to technical damage. Stéphane Peterhansel/Edouard Boulanger were not spared either and experienced problems with a hydraulic system due to a hard landing after a jump. So far, this was the only significant damage suffered by the technicians under the direction of Dr. Leonardo Pascali. Peterhansel/Boulanger dropped back to 22nd position. “That was very unfortunate, because we were sixth overall the day before and had a chance of a good final result,” said 14-time Dakar winner Peterhansel.

Second place was enough for Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz to take the lead with a lead of 20.21 minutes. “It’s been a tough rally so far, in which we haven’t been able to catch our breath for a moment. In the dust of various competitors we got into critical situations several times in the early days,” said the three-time Dakar winner Sainz. “So it’s all the more pleasing that we took the lead on the 48H Chrono stage. But that doesn’t mean anything yet, because we’re only at the halfway point.” Mattias Ekström/Emil Bergkvist, who are only taking part in this rally for the fourth time, have now improved to second overall thanks to third place on Friday. “I’m really happy, even though we got stuck in the sand once in the Empty Quarter,” said former rallycross world champion and DTM champion Mattias Ekström. “Our car ran perfectly. The navigation was difficult. Emil had to find the right way and I had to find a suitable pace. We can be very satisfied with our current position.”

After 2,304 kilometers of stages and a total distance of 4,201 kilometers to date, the teams will start the second half of the rally on Sunday. Once again, long daily distances of almost 500 kilometers of stages and challenging terrain lie ahead of the participants. “We are proud of what we have achieved so far. Of course we are ambitious, but we are full of respect and have no illusions about the tasks ahead of us,” says Rolf Michl. Fans can continue to follow the action on the social media channels of Audi Official and Audi Sport. The popular video format “Inside Dakar” offers exciting pictures every evening, an insightful overview of the day’s events and many direct impressions from those involved.



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