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## The most challenging race on the planet? Dakar Rally is a good bet

 By Ryan McGee  
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Racers are a very territorial people. They believe their series is the best, their cars are the fastest, and their schedule is the most challenging -- and they are never more passionate than when it comes to defending their centerpiece race.

Ask one simple question -- What's the most difficult race in the world? -- and watch them circle the wagons. In Europe, they'll point to the Monaco Grand Prix or the 24 Hours of Le Mans. In America, it'll be one of the 500s, Daytona or Indy. In between, you might get a vote for the Pikes Peak Hill International Climb, Isle of Man TT, Baja 1,000 or even the Knoxville Nationals.

But the real answer is "None of the above," and deep down, they all know it.

The world's greatest motorsports challenge drops the green flag on Jan. 5, while the mainstream racing world is still sleeping. The Dakar Rally is a half-month marathon that begins in Lisbon, Portugal, and ends deep within the African continent in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Nearly 600 teams across three different divisions will hammer their way over pavement, dirt, gravel, rock, mud, seawater, head-high grass and skyscraper sand dunes. Some race to win, some race to finish, others simply hope to survive. The competitors are a mix of world-class racers, billionaire thrill seekers and gamblers looking to earn a little cash on the dash. It's like the movie "Hidalgo," just not as boring and with horsepower instead of horses.



Robby Gordon racked up a solid eighth-place finish in the 2007 Dakar Rally.

"If someone throws a stick or a rock onto the course at Le Mans, they stop the whole damn race to go out and pick it up," says Jacky Ickx, retired F1 ace and 1983 Dakar champion. "In the Dakar Rally, it is the most horrible conditions one can imagine. Soaring heat, blinding sandstorms, wild animals, sometimes booby traps and people shooting at you. It sounds like I am making it up, but trust me, I am not."

Want to know more? Of course you do. Especially when we tell you that, for the very first time, an American has a realistic shot of winning it all. And no, it's not Viggo Mortensen. It's a genuine All-American NASCAR Sprint Cup racer.

### Dakar 101

More than any other race, massive numbers tell the mind-boggling story of Dakar: 570 teams representing 43 nations, 300-plus support vehicles, thousands of crew members, three different types of racing machines, 15 days, 9,723 kilometers at 300K-800K per day, covering two continents and five countries.

Each morning competitors take the green flag one by one, staggered out by class and speed. Remember those time trial stages of the Tour de France when Lance Armstrong would start last and start running people down one by one? That's exactly how a rally event works -- only a lot faster and a hell of a lot scarier.

The three classes are moto (yes, dudes on motorcycles), car and truck, each containing different divisions of varying size and modification. The car class includes light and medium-sized trucks, while the entries in the truck category look like high-tech moving vans, ditching 4-by-4 for 6-by-6 and weighing in at an elephantine 7,800 pounds.

The vast majority of the competitors hail from Europe, from England to Scandinavia to Russia, and a contingent of Asian nations are always represented. Most professional racers (amateurs make up roughly 80 percent of the field) come from already established off-road divisions such as the World Rally Championship or Baja, while others are stepping in from road and formula racing backgrounds, hoping to add to their racing résumés.

Americans have been slow to participate, but there are always a handful popping up in the car (mostly light truck) and moto divisions, though a Yank has never won the event. This year is the U.S.'s best chance yet, but more on that later.

On Jan. 5, they'll take the green flag in Lisbon and head south toward the Mediterranean. The vehicles will be shipped over to North Africa and pick it up again in Morocco, zigzagging through the Western Sahara and Mauritania and ultimately crossing the finish line in Senegal on Jan. 20. In a good year, one-quarter of the vehicles will finish. In an average year, two people will die along the way.

Big race, big target

As the rally's global profile has risen, so has the target on its back, raising the ire of environmentalists, local governments and African revolutionaries.

Why all the anger? In this age of the world versus the West, the symbolism of multimillion-dollar, gas-guzzling machines blasting through some of the most poverty-stricken locations on Earth has not gone unnoticed. Locals complain that the big trucks do irreparable damage to the dunes and the teams merely pass through without providing any real economic impact. Greenpeace has called it "the ultimate antienvironmental movement," and an Italian newspaper once described it as "a blood-covered race of irresponsibility."

While the irresponsibility is debatable (event officials have long maintained that the event draws more global attention to the plight of Africa than any other sporting event), the bloodshed is not. In three decades of racing, the Dakar has claimed 49 lives, 24 of which have been drivers, the other half a mix of crew members, officials and spectators. The latest public outcry began in 2005, when a 5-year-old Senegalese girl wandered onto the race course and was killed by a support vehicle. The shouts became even louder one year later, when 10- and 12-year-old boys were killed in consecutive days.

This year, rally directors have promised better crowd control but openly admit the impossibility of policing the entire 5,762-mile course. Local governments have long warned that more death could mean no more stages allowed within their borders, but so far few actual moves have taken place. Rally teams have agreed to a multiyear plan that pumps money into the local economies and works to restore ecosystems along the course.

However, politics and threats have yet to make a dent in the event's growth. Each year the entry list contains nearly 40 percent new racers over the year before and the number of competitors has increased by a full 100 vehicles since 2005.

U-S-A! U-S-A!

For the men and women behind the wheel, their greatest danger exists where the spectators do not, those darkest corners of the desert where the world goes to die. Where water vanishes, animals cook where they stand, and humans dare to visit only if there's a casino to sleep in or they were dragged there by Nicky Santoro.

Then there's [Robby Gordon](#). The hotter, the dustier and the more desolate, the better. Throw him into the middle of the sand and the stronger Gordon's stride seems to become, the more at ease he seems to be. He's mastered every North American off-road race that matters. Now he represents our nation's best hope at winning Dakar. Gordon was raised in Lakewood, Calif., near the swanky beaches of the O.C. But as his friends grabbed their surfboards and headed for the Pacific, Robby powered his way east into the high desert of SoCal and Nevada.

"I was already racing off-road when Robby was born," says Bob Gordon, once known as Baja Bob, but now proudly identified as Robby's dad. "I had him strapped onto the top of the gas tank in my two-seater Volkswagen down at Baja when he was 5 years old. There he was, ratchet-strapped in there with this big ol' helmet on, hanging onto the roll bar for 500 miles in the desert. It's the worst thing I ever did because he's been hooked ever since."

By the age of 8, Robby was racing dirt bikes. By 16 he was in off-road trucks, winning the first event he entered, the 1985 Nevada 400. Even as his career



Gordon on the Dakar Rally: "I don't even know how much it pays to win. I just want to win it."

has driven through Champ Car, IndyCar, IMSA, IROC and NASCAR, he has returned to the desert every winter for the Baja 1,000, earning three wins.

"During all of that time, Dakar was always on my mind," Gordon admits as he scrambles through the final preparations for his third start in the rally. "I'd talk to people that had run it or been over there to see it, and it was hard to imagine how hard it really had to be. Even with all the research and prep work and watching highlights on TV, until I actually got over there I really didn't grasp how damn near impossible it is."

In 2006, Gordon attacked Dakar with the same all-out style he'd learned on the Baja Peninsula. Only two stages in, he was exhausted and his vehicle was a mess. Eventually the team withdrew after missing a checkpoint. One year ago, Gordon came in with a more methodical game plan, resisting his natural hammer-down instincts and self-preaching patience, a philosophy that was constantly hammered into his radio headset by shotgun navigator Andy Grider. The result was a series of firsts: the first stage victory for an American racer, the first stage victory for an American manufacturer (GM's Hummer division) and an overall eighth-place finish.

"This time, our third time, we've got notes to go back to and lessons that we've learned from," Gordon said. "This year the Hummer is much more durable and the chassis is much more prepared for the changing conditions. Our crew is better prepared. Our chase vehicles are better prepared. We've also added a second team, and just like NASCAR, two heads are better than one."

That second H3 will be driven by multimillionaire entrepreneur and fellow Dakar vet Ronn Bailey, who has pledged his allegiance to Gordon and literally placed his life in the hands of Robby Gordon Motorsports.

"For Robby to have gotten this team to where it is in such a short period of time is amazing," Bailey says with a grin. "This chassis he has built is among the finest in the world. This team is more than capable of winning the race."

Planes, trains and very large automobiles

Since they returned home in January, that team has worked nearly around the clock at Gordon's off-road shop in Anaheim, Calif., testing each and every piece and part to improve durability. They've constructed two H3s as well as a fleet of six support vehicles that include everything needed for the 19-person crew to conduct overnight vehicle overhauls, from parts and fuel to food and water. (During the stages all repairs must be completed on the fly by the driver and navigator.)

The support fleet of 4-by-4 and 6-by-6 trucks left California nearly a month ago, trucked to Savannah, Ga., and were placed on cargo ships bound for Portugal. The race vehicles will be airlifted on Dec. 30 and were still being put through their paces on the chassis dynamometer as late as Christmas Eve.

"It definitely costs more to do it this way," Gordon says without even the slightest hint of exhaustion. "But we've got too much time and energy invested in this to get to Lisbon and realize that we could have been better prepared. Keeping the Hummers at the shop as long as possible is the best thing to do."

Gordon spent the holidays jetting back and forth from Anaheim to his NASCAR shop in Charlotte, N.C. Once again, he will sit out Daytona 500 testing to chase Dakar, sending his team to the beach with a sub in his driver's seat. Since mid-November, the last of the NASCAR driver-owners has polished off an impressive 26th-place showing in Nextel Cup points, finished fifth in the Baja 1,000, prepared two vehicles for Dakar, locked up sponsor Jim Beam for 2008, and hired a new crew chief for his Cup ride. Every hour is lived with a Sharpie in hand, wrench in the other and a cell phone cradled to his ear.

"Robby doesn't stop," says Bob, still amazed at what his boy has done since they began building dune buggies in a tiny shop behind the house. "He doesn't know how to stop. Other teams may have more money and more resources, but no one has more



Gordon's Ford Fusion handles a little differently than the Hummer he'll be driving in the Dakar Rally, which begins Jan. 5.



A caravan of Robby Gordon support vehicles trekked from California to Savannah, Ga., where they were loaded up and shipped to Portugal.

drive. He sets his mind to do something and he keeps plowing until it gets done. He is driven to do things that no one else has done."

Beginning Jan. 5, he'll get a shot to do just that, hoping to wave Old Glory from atop his Hummer in downtown Dakar two weeks later. The sole survivor of sand, wind, mud, death and international politics.

"I don't even know how much it pays to win," Gordon admits. "I just want to win it."

Take that, "Hildago."

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