

World stars set for big power battle in Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge

Al Attiyah, Sunderland face intense pressure as new World Rally-Raid Championship arrives in UAE capital

● **Bahrain Raid Xtreme yet to confirm full driver line-up**

TDI | Manama

Bahrain Raid Xtreme and the other major forces in the new World Rally-Raid Championship are heading for a spectacular battle for power in the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge next month.

With all the teams fighting for the inaugural cars and bikes world titles assembling in the UAE capital, the stage is set for the most eagerly awaited showdown in the event's 31-year history from 5-10 March.

After his opening round victory in last month's Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia, defending champion Nasser Al Attiyah can expect intense pressure as he aims to build on his Dakar Racing on course for the drivers and manufacturers world crowns.

Meanwhile, Sam Sunderland, who developed his desert riding skills in the UAE, faces another big test in a world-class line-up as he looks to build on his Dakar bikes triumph for Gasgas Factory Racing.

The Emirates Motorsports Organization (EMSO), the rally



Sebastien Loeb with his BRX car

“We attach great importance to organizing international and community sporting events in the Al Dhafra region, and value the role of the rally in shedding light on the features of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and its desert terrain

AREF AL AWANI SECRETARY GENERAL OF ABU DHABI SPORTS COUNCIL

organisers, will announce what is expected to be a bumper final entry list on 25th February,

and Abu Dhabi Sports Council (ADSC) says the event's place in the World Rally-Raid Championship represents another step forward in the UAE's sporting achievements.

“We are pleased to participate in supporting and organizing the 31st edition of the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge,” said Aref Al Awani Secretary General of ADSC, which has a long-term partnership with the EMSO to stage and promote the rally.

“We attach great importance to organizing international and community sporting events in the Al Dhafra region, and value the role of the rally in shedding light on the features of the Emir-

BETTER YOU KNOW

Al Attiyah's path to a fourth triumph in the event is under threat from a succession of the world's top drivers, including Stéphane Peterhansel, who is targeting a record seventh cars victory in the event with Team Audi Sport

ate of Abu Dhabi and its desert terrain.”

The Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge takes place under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Ruler's Representative in Al Dhafra Region.

Al Attiyah's path to a fourth triumph in the event is under threat from a succession of the world's top drivers, including Stéphane Peterhansel, who is targeting a record seventh cars victory in the event with Team Audi Sport.

Joining the heat of the battle are Saudi Arabia's Yazeed Al Ra-



Nasser Al Attiyah in action (file photo)

jhi (Overdrive Racing), Poland's Jakub Przygonski and Russian Denis Rotov Denis (X-raid MINI JCW Team) and 2018 winner in Abu Dhabi, Martin Prokop (Benzina Orlen Team).

While Bahrain Raid Xtreme have yet to confirm their full driver line-up after Sébastien Loeb's second place Dakar finish, they will add to the intensity of the contest among the dramatic desert landscape of the Al Dhafra region.

The tussle for supremacy on four wheels will be matched by the strength of competition on two wheels, as Sunderland looks to add to his Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge victories in 2017 and 2019.

Austrian star Matthias Walkner had already clinched the 2021 FIM world title before winning in Abu Dhabi last year, and he returns to the Al Dhafra dunes to spearhead another big assault by Red Bull KTM Factory Racing.

Team-mates Toby Price, the 2016 winner in Abu Dhabi, and last year's Dakar champion Kevin Benavides, are among the other big threats to Sunderland in the chase for the Rally GP title. Botswana rider Ross Branch, winner of last year's Rally Kazakhstan, goes into action with fellow Hero Motorsports Team Rally riders Joaquim Rodrigues and Franco Caimi.

Mercedes and Red Bull could be playing catch-up in new F1 season: Brawn

AFP | London

Formula One managing director Ross Brawn believes Mercedes and Red Bull could be off the pace when the new season starts next month after they were caught up in last year's "intense" world championship battle.

Lewis Hamilton was poised to capture a record-breaking eighth world title at the Abu Dhabi finale in December before a controversial safety car restart allowed Dutch driver Max Verstappen to pass his British rival on the last lap.

Brawn, who has spearheaded a major overhaul of the sport's technical regulations, said Mercedes -- winners of the past eight constructors' championships -- and Red Bull might have taken their eyes off the ball.

Jenson Button profited in 2009 when Brawn GP took advantage of a regulation change, winning six of the opening seven races on his way to the title.

Hamilton was the defending champion at the time but his McLaren team endured a torrid campaign and he recorded just two victories.

The budget cap for the forthcoming year also restricts teams to spending \$140 million (£103 million).

“Mercedes and Red Bull could be impacted,” said Brawn. “Last year, human resources



Max Verstappen (right) and Lewis Hamilton talk after a race

“A team has to balance its financial resources each season, too, and you cannot simply throw money at it. That is what teams with deep pockets did in the past. It will provide us with a more competitive field for the future

ROSS BRAWN

were devoted to fighting a very intense world championship. Some of the teams further back didn't have that consideration.

“If I had been Ferrari or McLaren in the very early part of last year, I would have put everything into the 2022 car.

“That is what happened in 2009. The year before there was a big battle between Ferrari and McLaren and they fell flat on their faces. I don't think it will be that severe but is a good point.

“A team has to balance its financial resources each season, too, and you cannot simply throw money at it. That is what teams with deep pockets did in the past. It will provide us with a more competitive field for the future.”

Brawn described 2021 as a “great season” between two drivers and two teams but said he wanted to see more teams in the mix.

“I don't think the regulations will change the general order dramatically -- the good teams will always do a good job -- but it will bring the field closer,” he said.

Ferrari unveil sleek new car with ambitions to end world title drought

AFP | Milan

Charles Leclerc said “expectations are very high” as Ferrari yesterday unveiled their new F1-75 car which they hope can challenge Mercedes and Red Bull for the Formula One world title this year.

Ferrari have not won the constructors' title in 14 years, with the Scuderia finishing third last season and sixth in 2020.

The most successful Formula One team won the last of their record 16 constructors' titles in 2008, with Finland's Kimi Raikkonen lifting the last drivers' title for the Prancing Horse in 2007.

Their last race victory came with former driver Sebastian Vettel, who led a Ferrari one-two ahead of Leclerc at the Singapore Grand Prix in 2019.

Monaco's Leclerc and Spaniard Carlos Sainz will continue their quest to break Mercedes and Red Bull's domination next season.

Sainz, 27, finished fifth last season, two places above 24-year-old Leclerc.

“Expectations are very high because we are Ferrari and we are always expected to win,” said Leclerc.

“But we will only know once we're on the track.”

Revealed at Maranello, the F1-75 takes its name from an important anniversary for the



Ferrari's drivers Charles Leclerc (L) and Carlos Sainz (R) posing next to the new Ferrari F1-75

16
constructors' titles have been won by Ferrari, the last in 2008

team, 75 years since founder Enzo Ferrari produced his first Ferrari car.

The car features a darker red and black livery, a throwback to the Scuderia's oldest cars, combined with the innovative design of the new F1 machines.

But the F1-75 has a different profile from its predecessor to comply with the new regulations coming into force this season, which many people

expect to make the grid more competitive.

The latter favours the ground effect, or suction, rather than aerodynamic support in order to allow F1 cars to overtake more easily in the race, with the cars featuring larger wheels.

The new Ferrari also features a two-piece nose with the wing attached to the lower one, which should give engineers a greater range of settings to suit the characteristics of different circuits.

Red Bull has already presented a preliminary version of its F1 2022 car and Mercedes is due to present its own on Friday.

The first pre-season tests are scheduled in Barcelona from February 23-25 and the first race will take place in Bahrain on March 20.