

RALLY TUNISIA

Ist Marathonrallye Grand Erg

Legs In The Sand

by Peter Stenz



"Unforeseen Challenges" was the doomed promise of the premiere of the Marathonrallye Grand Erg. Indeed, only one single team mastered the key leg of the Germany-based amateur race event. Stage by stage, the off-road rally was laid-out to be tricky and selective. The 2006 event will demand even more endurance from the competitors.

Starting with the very first kilometers, the race left even rally-proven Tunisian bystanders stunned. Engines roared the leaves off the scattered bushes, raising dust so dense that drivers would rather fly by wire if they only could. The pace of the desert-bound stages was high - and so was the risk to ruin the cars at the ever present ditches and rocks. Sights such as the majestic landscape of the Dahar Mountains and the picturesque hamlet of Chenini could not excite drivers and navigators. They just had to focus on the road book and circuit. Even before reaching the dunes at Tunisia's desert capital, Douz, the race left some competition cars severely damaged.

Mean would be the right word to describe the stage just south of Tataouine. The organizers called it "selective", translating into sudden death for many a shock absorber, even if it involved sporting posh and renowned brand names. Passages packed with camel grass slowed down pimped racers and standard-type 4-wheelers alike, producing equal chances for both types of teams.

An inviting gathering of smaller dunes served as exercising ground for next day's 200-kilometer stage, south of Ksar Ghilane. As this leg was declared first part of a two-day marathon stage with strictly no service at the camp, even the more enthusiastic teams used rather brains than throttle to keep their cars in shape.

Fighting the sands was the motto of the day south of Tunisia's gateway to the desert, Douz. The organizer had wisely indicated

"emergency exits" in the briefings beforehand, and almost each team made use of these shortcuts. Those guys preferred the hotel pool and dinner - after repeatedly sinking their 4-wheelers in white sand and painfully digging them out again, their legs deeply stuck in the sand.

Exactly one single team mastered what the organizer had defined as the key leg. Sadly enough, the 4-axle MAN truck reached the finish just minutes after the race director had closed down the score list. The truck crew would have been in time if not held up by three punctures in a row. For each flat wheel, the crew dragged a spare tube through the sand, weighing 100 kilograms. In this respect, Race director Jorg Russler did not express much sympathy. "Marathonrally Grand Erg is designed as a challenge, and the teams appreciate it", he shrugged.

The Germany-built MAN truck got some thumbs-up from competitors during a navigation task scheduled the day after. The leading cars, painfully circling dune after dune, soon saw the taillights of the 15-ton monster heading towards finish on a straight line. Once the truck was through, the race cars followed the graded tracks seamlessly, making way for an unexpected overall winner of the first "Grand Erg", Frank Henning. Berlin-born businessman, Henning, in his standard type Nissan Terrano, had left 200 horse power-Pajeros and other FIA-homologated race cars behind in the score list. Not speeding was the secret of his success - he simply collected less penalties.

Next year's Grand Erg promises to be even more demanding than the debut. The stages take the race into the restricted area far south, where Tunisia's border meets both Algeria's and Libya's. May 2006 will see even higher dunes and teams fighting even harder - and again they will appreciate it. **AW**