



**Yanbu, Saudi Arabia | 04 January 2026**

## **A POWERFUL FIRST STAGE FOR HERO MOTOSPORTS AT DAKAR 2026**

### **CORNEJO & BRANCH IN OVERALL TOP-10**

**Hero MotoSports Team Rally**, the motorsport team of the world's largest manufacturer of motorcycles and scooters - **Hero MotoCorp**, has delivered a remarkable performance at the first special Stage of the Dakar Rally 2026, with two of three riders finishing in the top-10.

Competing in the premier Rally GP category, Chilean rider Nacho Cornejo crossed the finish line with a solid 6th fastest time of the day. Despite finishing the Stage with the fastest time, an unfortunate time penalty pushed Botswana's Ross Branch down to the 7th position. Austrian Tobias Ebster, competing in Rally2, crossed the finish line at 14th place, while also securing an impressive 4th place in his category.



At the end of Stage 1, Cornejo and Branch are placed 6th and 7th respectively in the overall Rally classifications. Ebster currently holds 13th place overall, and 4th in Rally2, keeping himself among the top contenders in the category.



Ross Branch was the fastest man on the Stage, riding tall with a commanding display of speed and control. The Kalahari Ferrari was stuck in the dust behind another competitor for some period, and an opportunity to overtake arrived in a speed-controlled zone. Although the airline pilot crossed the finish line first with a strong 1.5 minute lead, a hefty six-minute speeding penalty was slapped on later. Ross is currently just under 5 minutes from the leader of the race, and hopes to recover lost time in the upcoming Stages.

Nacho Cornejo was one of the first competitors on Stage 1, and delivered an outstanding performance all through the day. Soon after the 70-kilometre mark, the Chilean caught up with the frontrunners, and then continued to open the tracks for the remaining route. Riding solo with strong composure, and navigating with great precision, Nacho has earned his well-deserved spot in the Rally's overall top-10.

For Tobias Ebster, the day proved to be a true test of Dakar instincts. The Austrian aced complex navigation through rocky wadis, and still managed to finish just outside the top-10 of the day. A sandstorm erased the tracks ahead of him, forcing the promising young rider to rely on his navigation skills. Nevertheless, his strong finish on Stage 1 places Ebster at a good starting position for the next one.

On the first 'real' Stage of Dakar 2026, competitors tackled a demanding 518 km loop around Yanbu, which included 305 km in timed special. The route offered a wide variety of terrain - featuring rocky hard-packed sections, fast sandy stretches, and scattered dunes.

Stage 2 on Monday will take the rally caravan from the Yanbu bivouac to Al-Ula. From the shores of Yanbu, the terrain will quickly turn mountainous - a rugged horizon in every direction. On the 504 km route, competitors will encounter frequent changes of pace across fast tracks and winding, rocky sections that will eventually lead them to the enchanting landscapes of Al-Ula.



#### **Nacho Cornejo, Hero MotoSports Team Rally:**

*"Stage 01 is done and it was a pretty solid day for us. From around kilometre 50 till the finish we had to open the stage, and despite that we managed to finish sixth, which is positive. We didn't lose too much time to the front, so I'm really happy with how the day went. The bike felt great and I was comfortable with the navigation, which gave me a lot of confidence. Overall, it was a good day for the team. This is just the beginning and we'll keep pushing day by day. Thank you to everyone for the amazing support."*

#### **Ross Branch, Hero MotoSports Team Rally:**

*"That's the end of Stage 01 and it was an incredible day on the bike. I had a lot of fun right from the start and the bike was working perfectly. Unfortunately, about three-quarters into the stage, I got stuck behind another rider in the dust for a long time. When I finally made a move to pass, I unknowingly went through a speed zone, which cost us time. Despite that, I'm super happy with the bike and how everything feels, and I'm really looking forward to the rest of the rally."*

**Tobias Ebster, Hero MotoSports Team Rally:**

*"Stage 01 was definitely not an easy one. Navigation was tricky, with big rocks in the wide wadis, and later a sandstorm came in, which completely erased the lines. Everyone had to rely purely on navigation. Despite that, I felt good on the bike throughout the stage. I may have been a little cautious at times, but the feeling was positive. It's only the first day and Dakar has just begun, so I'm looking forward to Stage 02 tomorrow."*

**Provisional Classification - Stage 01 (Overall):**

|     |                |                                   |                  |
|-----|----------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1.  | Edgar Canet    | Redbull KTM Factory Racing        | 03h 16m 11s      |
| 2.  | Daniel Sanders | Redbull KTM Racing Team           | + 01m 02s        |
| 3.  | Ricky Brabec   | Monster Energy Honda HRC          | + 01m 32s        |
| 6.  | Nacho Cornejo  | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 03m 48s</b> |
| 7.  | Ross Branch    | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 04m 39s</b> |
| 14. | Tobias Ebster  | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 13m 26s</b> |

**Provisional Classification after Stage 01 (Overall):**

|     |                |                                   |                  |
|-----|----------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1.  | Edgar Canet    | Redbull KTM Factory Racing        | 03h 27m 42s      |
| 2.  | Daniel Sanders | Redbull KTM Racing Team           | + 01m 05s        |
| 3.  | Ricky Brabec   | Monster Energy Honda HRC          | + 01m 37s        |
| 6.  | Nacho Cornejo  | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 04m 53s</b> |
| 7.  | Ross Branch    | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 04m 55s</b> |
| 14. | Tobias Ebster  | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 14m 11s</b> |

**Provisional Rankings -Stage 01 - Rally2:**

|    |                  |                                   |                  |
|----|------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. | Michael Docherty | BAS World KTM Team                | 03h 25m 09s      |
| 2. | Martim Ventura   | Monster Energy Honda HRC          | + 01m 28s        |
| 3. | Konrad Dabrowski | Duust Rally Team                  | + 03m 49s        |
| 4. | Tobias Ebster    | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 04m 28s</b> |

**Provisional Rankings after Stage 01 - Rally2:**

|    |                  |                                   |                  |
|----|------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. | Michael Docherty | BAS World KTM Team                | 03h 36m 59s      |
| 2. | Martim Ventura   | Monster Energy Honda HRC          | + 02m 14s        |
| 3. | Konrad Dabrowski | Duust Rally Team                  | + 04m 15s        |
| 4. | Tobias Ebster    | <b>Hero MotoSports Team Rally</b> | <b>+ 04m 54s</b> |

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**For more information:**

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