

Lost in the Andean foothills on day 10 of the Dakar Rally, Sam Sunderland could feel his lead slipping away. The 27-year-old from Dorset was on his third attempt at the famed 5,000-mile bike, car and truck race across South America. He was suffering in the 45-degree heat, guiding his motorbike around rocks and bushes in a dried-up riverbed near Chilecito in northern Argentina, and trying to get back on track.

The Red Bull KTM Factory Team rider had not managed to actually finish the race before (half of all entrants don't), and it was playing on his mind - especially after missing last year's race entirely because of a broken leg sustained in a crash in Morocco.

"You're thinking to yourself: 'Man, I've worked so hard for this,'" he explains. "I have two days left and now I'm lost.' You just picture your whole year of preparation going downhill. It really started to get on top of me a bit, and take over the mind."

Fortunately for Sunderland, his competitors were in similar trouble on that day - one actually passed out from

the heat - so he lost only about 15 minutes on the day. After starting in the jungles of Paraguay and rising to salt flats of Bolivia, he finished in Buenos Aires on January 14 with a total race time of 32 hours, six minutes and 22 seconds - the quickest bike by more than half an hour, making him the first Brit to win the Dakar on any vehicle. We spoke to Sunderland, at his base in Dubai, shortly afterwards.

Has winning the Dakar Rally sunk in?

"Only just now, really - getting home, going to see my buddies - you kind of start to feel it. When you're there, it's a bit hectic going from thing to thing. But now it feels really cool. To get the Dakar is unreal. The Dakar is like the Olympics of our sport, so it's an incredible feeling. When you've put so much effort and work into something, and you have so many ups and downs, I think the reward feels even better."

Were you surprised to be leading?

"I mean, I race these guys in the [Cross-Country Rallies] World Championships and

I finished second in the past two seasons; this year I missed out by a point. So it's not a massive shock. Leading was a really cool feeling, but it comes with a lot of pressure - a lot of weight on the shoulders. To lead it for six days was pretty heavy, dude."

Did you change your approach this time, after going out before day four on your previous two attempts?

"Yeah, I think I definitely went into it with a different mindset. I tried to work on the psychological side, to try and be more prepared and relaxed in stressful situations, and really try and take it easy that first week to get through it. But at the same time, you're racing, you know? If you were to go out there and say: 'I'm going to take no risks at all,' you'd be 30 minutes behind and you've lost the race before it has even started. There is risk. It's motorsport, and you have to try and calculate that risk and be as safe as you can, but at the same time you're racing bikes through the desert.

"A hundred per cent of the time, we're going over new terrain. We don't know

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what's coming at us. There are stones, rocks, riverbeds, dunes, bushes - a lot of cows on the route this year."

Is it hard to stay focused?

"Yeah man, it's really heavy. We have to ride, we have to navigate. Then you start to add in the long days - 12 to 15 hours a day on the bike, and lack of sleep. We get five

or six hours of sleep per night, and then you start adding in altitude - we were at 4,000m in Bolivia. It's really hard."

You're much more exposed to the elements than the car and truck racers, too...

"Yeah - I guess you could say the faster you go, the more wind you get, so that's motivation to go fast. We went from 45 degrees in Paraguay, and it was humid as hell, to two degrees in Bolivia for six days at altitude, so there was no oxygen. Then the last five days were back at 45 degrees in Argentina.

"But it's the same for all the guys on the bike - every year you have problems with guys getting dehydrated and overheating and blacking out. You have to try and manage it as best you can. But if you have too much water, you flush your system of salts, and it's almost as bad as having no water. It gets really hard to focus during those times and difficult to see straight - and if you miss one stone in the riverbed, it can be the end of your race. Toby Price,

who won it last year, that's what happened to him [this year]. It was the end of a long, straight, big, dry riverbed, and he kicked a stone that he didn't see and that was that. He broke his femur."

How do you eat and drink during the race?

"On the bikes we have a camel pack, and we put food and electrolytes and a mix of protein in there. Then we have a small pouch with a liquid meal inside. It's just being tube-fed, to be honest. And then [on each stage] we get the refuel, which is 15 minutes to put fuel in the bike, and in that 15 minutes we're trying to cram in as much as possible.

"I've experimented with a lot of different things. This Dakar, I used these drinks that they give to hospital patients - they're like small milkshakes, but really high in calories. They seem to do pretty well, but at the same time it's like 45 degrees outside and you're drinking a warm chocolate milkshake. It's not that enjoyable." ●

@amitkatwala

K I N G O F T H E D E S E R T

Sleep deprivation and warm chocolate milkshake. What it takes to triumph in the Dakar Rally, by Sam Sunderland – Britain's first ever winner of the race

Words **Amit Katwala**

