

Robby Gordon, Santee's Kevin Heath ready for second attempt at Dakar Rally

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Robby Gordon has raced in the Indy 500 as well as NASCAR's premier Nextel Cup Series and is a two-time champion in the SCORE Baja 1000 off-road race.

But Saturday he starts his second attempt at what he considers the ultimate challenge: the Dakar Rally.

"This is like having 16 Indy 500s or 16 Daytona 500s in a row without the luxury of having a garage to work out of," said Gordon, who last year became the first American to win a stage in the annual trek across the Sahara Desert and northwest Africa.

"Dakar is a complete different challenge. To me it's much more than just the driver and the car. The logistics are mind-numbing."

Last year, Gordon was part of the Volkswagen factory team that won the event. Gordon won two of the 16 stages before suffering a major crash. He finished 12th overall.

This year he returns as the head of his own team, driving a factory-backed Hummer H3.

The 28th Dakar Rally starts Saturday in Lisbon, Portugal and ends Jan. 15 at Dakar, Senegal. The 16 stages total close to 3,100 miles with only one rest day interrupting the grind.

This year's entry list of 508 cars, motorcycles and trucks includes Santee's Kevin Heath, who, like Gordon, will be making a second attempt.

Heath's inaugural Dakar effort ended on the sixth stage last year when the gearbox on his BMW motorcycle froze and broke. By that time, Heath had already had stage finishes of 209th, 67th and 55th (among the 233 motorcyclists) and had not been scored on two stages.

"I was just getting into the rhythm of the race when the transmission failed, possibly because of a rather hard crash the day before or a second one earlier that morning," Heath said recently. "The lever broke off and the clutch failed. I was having to jam the bike into gear when that also failed."

Not that his adventures ended with his withdrawal from the race. Actually, they were just beginning.

Race organizers found a ride for Heath and three other stranded motorcyclists out of the desert in Mauritania. But that car broke down after only 25 miles. The quartet then loaded their stuff into a private vehicle, whose driver tried hours later to strand them in the middle of nowhere.

Heath and his compatriots dodged several robbery attempts before arriving at an air transport site four days later.

"At the time, I swore to myself that I'd never do it again," Heath said recently. "But the more I thought about it, the more I saw that just finishing the Dakar Rally would be the ultimate experience."

A native of South Africa, Heath came to the United States in 1986 to compete in his double loves of triathlons and motorcycle endurance races. In 2004, he was the only solo rider to finish the SCORE Baja 500 off-road race.

By that time he was already plotting his Dakar debut.

"I'm a lot smarter than I was a year ago," said Heath. For example, last year he faced the challenge solo. This year he has a co-rider in Atlanta's James Embro.

Heath's dream, which can be followed on his Web site (kevinsmidlifecrisis.com) would be fulfilled by finishing the race. Gordon wants to win.

"I would be disappointed with anything other than a win," said Gordon, whose race shop has built support vehicles for the event as well as the H3 race truck. He will be supported by a 16-man crew.

The Outdoor Life Network will carry daily updates of the Dakar rally beginning Jan. 31 with the first of two stages in Portugal. There are a total of four American entries in the event.

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[Illustration]

1 PIC; Caption: Kevin Heath

Credit: STAFF WRITER

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