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The Solbergs on Safari...

Petter Solberg contested the Safari Rally four times (1999-2002). He finished fifth twice and retired twice. The 2003 World Rally Champion shares his African adventures with his 19-year-old son Oliver.

OS: If you can give me one piece of advice before Safari Rally Kenya, what's it going to be?

PS: Don't stroke the lions. No, you know this is going to be a tough one. You have to be patient and sensible with this rally. OK, it's not the long one like it used to be in the championship, but the nature of the roads is still the same – still, there will be some rough sections, some technical places and some bloody fast places!

OS: How rough? Worse than Acropolis?

PS: I don't know the roads and I've only seen the same [organisers] video like you, but when we were in Africa before, the washaways and holes in the road could be incredible. And sometimes they were coming in the middle of a sixth-gear section. You have to be ready to change the way you think about rallies. If you get a very slow section, you have to be ready to understand that you will slow down to the slowest speed you might ever drive a rally car and crawl over some big rocks, then go again.

OS: I can't wait! I know there's lots of talk about this not being the same rally like when it left 20-odd years ago, but it's still Kenya. We're going to Kenya for the Safari Rally and that's a really special feeling.

PS: What are you excited most about?

OS: I think it's just the whole adventure. You know sometimes, I have to just press a little bit the pause button and say: "I am 19 years old and look what I'm doing!" I feel like the most lucky person in the world. Just to go and see this landscape, these people and this place is so special – but to go there and drive the world's fastest rally car there is, it's something else. Just talking about it is making my hairs stand up on my neck.

PS: It's emotional...

OS: It is, it feels like more emotion than on other rallies. I don't know.

PS: It's a little bit because of the place. Africa is so different place from where we are competing usually – you go there and you know you will come away from the place with stories. The people are amazing and some of the nicest in the world, the atmosphere around the rally is incredible. You drive through

some of these villages and everybody is there, standing at the side of the road cheering and waving to you. It actually, makes you feel humble you know.

OS: You have great memories of those places...

PS: You don't forget these times. You know, these people have really not so much in their world, but I remember times when me and Phil would stop at the side of the road and the people are coming and offering you drinks and food, it's amazing.

OS: And what about your first ever Safari? I read this funny story on DirtFish about how you made it to your first Safari – you were going to Finnskog!

PS: I was. I had packed my bag. I had signed with Ford and I was doing some rallies in Norway with the Escort [WRC]. I was ready for Finnskog and looking forward to it. I got a call from Malcolm [Wilson] telling me: "Petter, stop. We have a new plan. You come on Safari now..." It was really late at night, but the team got me on the first flight to Kenya.

OS: But what about Thomas [Rådström]?

PS: Ah, OK. That bit of the story... I wasn't there, but the reason I was going was because Thomas, er, slipped on the floor in the hotel and broke his leg. Or that was the story we had. What really happened was a little bit different. Colin made a rugby tackle on Thomas after they had been out for dinner!

OS: Because of the rules, you had to take a different co-driver?

PS: I couldn't take Phil [Mills], so I had Thomas' co-driver Fred Gallagher. Fred was fantastic, I have to say. He had so much experience of that rally. He was telling me so many things and helping me a lot. Him and Malcolm was talking and I think they felt I was going too fast and too hard. This is what you had to understand for the Safari, it was completely different to a European event or somewhere like New Zealand. You had to respect the road and the car and everything. Fred made me slow down a lot – but he did it in a way that was so good. He was talking to me all the time like I was an equal person with him.

OS: That was your first proper factory drive. What was it like to finish fifth?

PS: It was a special result. Colin won the rally and I was fifth – but I really felt like a part of the team. Colin had stopped, completely stopped in one watersplash and I stopped to help him get out of the water and keep going. To know I had helped Colin and the team to win this one was fantastic for me. I was fifth again the following year, but then we had two retirements with technical problems in the Subaru. We lost a wheel in 2001 and had an engine issue in 2002.

OS: Was it the hardest rally you ever did?

PS: It was different. Yes, you have a lot of heat in Africa, but when you are coming with 160 or 180kph for all the time you have really good airflow in the car and it's much cooler than somewhere like Cyprus, where you are going from corner to corner at 80 or 90kph and there's no air coming in through the vents. And, don't forget, we had a helicopter above us all the time. That was so cool. Phil [Mills] would be calling notes and then I would have a voice from the helicopter telling me there was a load of elephants or giraffes over the next brow. The heli would fly over the animals and try to scare them off the road – if they couldn't, they would tell me to stay left or right.

OS: That's amazing!

PS: Ah, it was a special time. You will have safety helicopters this time, but the roads are closed to everybody else.

OS: For you they were open, which meant sometimes you could drive past a bus or something else – it's crazy to think of competing like this. But the time has changed a little bit now.

PS: It has. But the Safari is still going to be a proper challenge.

OS: I'm looking forward to making some memories!