

Giniel de Villiers: Off-road star

Giniel de Villiers is the 2009 Dakar Rally champion, achieving the first victory ever for a South African in this gruelling race. We talk driving, dreams and the Dakar with Giniel

By Miles Masterson

A victorious German-South African duo: Navigator Dirk von Zitzewitz of Germany (left), enjoys a triumphant moment with team-mate Giniel de Villiers as champions of Dakar 2009





The route of the Dakar 2009 took racers across extreme terrains between Argentina and Chile

In January 2009 Volkswagen Team Member Giniel de Villiers became the first South African to win the prestigious Dakar Rally in South America, the culmination of a long-term goal for both the Stellenbosch-based driver and his diesel-powered Volkswagen Race Touareg team.

The Dakar is the toughest offroad race in the world, requiring endurance, tenacity, courage and sheer determination. To participate is an achievement itself, to win is a triumph!

“I feel like I put in the effort and did my homework to win,” says Giniel, 37. “I’ve been trying to win it for seven years now, so to finally do it is great, it’s a monkey off my back.”

We meet at ‘Die Wynhuis’ in his hometown, Stellenbosch. Giniel (pronounced with a soft

‘G’) is lean, ruddy-faced, with clear blue eyes, brown hair and a strong handshake. Clutching a shiny cellphone, he is dressed immaculately in a blue and white pin-striped shirt, chinos and polished black shoes. Wincing, he suggests we stand at the bar counter, as he is suffering from a herniated disc in his back, a painful mountainbike injury he had to endure whilst driving the Dakar.

With that hard-earned victory and impressive career of race wins, it’s not surprising to find out Giniel has been racing since he was four years old. His dad Pieter built him a go-kart on his family’s fruit farm in Barrydale, where Giniel would dice his friends on makeshift tracks. “It had a 200cc petrol lawnmower engine, that did about 50 kilometres an hour,” beams Giniel proudly. “(So) obviously that helped a lot.”

Later, Giniel’s father took him to rallies and club races. Schooled at Paarl Gym, he was able to spend weekends with his dad (who had also moved to Paarl for business), at Killarney racetrack in Cape Town. Pieter eventually bought a car of his own to race there, but Giniel soon took it over. “One day I was quicker than him, and he said I should race the thing,” recalls Giniel.

So adept was the 19-year-old at driving, a year later in 1991, he graduated to Group N, and by 1993 had won the Stannic National Class D in an Opel Kadett. Then as factory driver for Nissan he won the championship in Class B and became SA Production Car Champion. Giniel moved up to Super Touring Cars in 1995 and won this individual championship title from 1997 to 2000.

That year he began his migration to the South African Off-road Championship, although says Giniel, he had not originally planned to change from tar to dirt. “If you’d told me 10 years ago I would be doing off-road racing,” he explains, “I would have probably told you are you mad... but in 2000 the touring car series fell flat in South Africa.”

His sponsor had decreed that in order to stay on their team, Giniel would have to make the transition. “I’m always up for a challenge,”

continues Giniel. “So

I thought, let’s give it a try, because

I wanted to get into something internationally and (they) also told me there was a possibility that we would go to the Dakar.”

However, Giniel is quick to point out the move wasn’t easy. “It’s a completely different discipline,” he says. “You’ve got to learn to read the road. On circuit

you know where the road goes, there you don’t know where the road goes; you’ve got different surfaces and things like that, so you’ve got to learn to adapt.” Giniel also had to deal with a navigator, “screaming and talking into your ear”. But as a champion touring car racer who had been competing for a decade, once he got used to it, his experience under race pressure contributed to his rapid ascension, and he won the SA Championship at the end of 2001.

Giniel does reluctantly admit to a few hairy moments as a rally rookie though. “Ja, I had a couple of close calls,” he relents reluctantly, adding that by then he’d already had a few accidents driving touring cars, including a few rolls, fortunately without serious injury. But he maintains rally driving is for more dangerous than touring. “At any given moment you’ve got more things going on, you’ve got to focus, you’ve got to think a bit more,” he says. “You have changing road surfaces, tricky situations, you have to cross dunes, you’ve got to find the way, sometimes you get stuck and you’ve got to get out of there, so there are a lot more things to deal with.

“You know,” he says as an afterthought, “I always tell people that my racing is more dangerous than playing rugby; but if you want to do something in life that is not dangerous, you must stay in bed... you’ve got to live life.”

The relentless international travel itinerary of a rally driver was another thing Giniel had to get used to. He currently spends more than 200 days a year racing, testing cars and fulfilling publicity obligations overseas. He clearly adapted well to the nomadic life straight away, winning his first international race, the



Moroccan Rally in 2003, and shortly afterwards finishing a respectable fifth in his Dakar debut. Over the years since, Giniel, who joined the Volkswagen team in 2005, has travelled to race in Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Portugal and the US among others, and is due to race in Russia for the first time this year.

Nevertheless, it is the Dakar Rally that contains the best and worst memories for Giniel. His excellent finishes notwithstanding (he placed seventh in 2004, fourth in 2005, second in 2006 and in 2007 had engine problems and had to withdraw early, ending 11th), it is also the venue of his scariest racing moment. This was not as you might think, actually driving, but at a customs post in 2005. "Where we crossed the border into Mauritania from Morocco," he describes, "there were some corrupt government officials and they were holding an AK47 into my face and also in my navigator's face... and we had to pay about R650 each or they wouldn't let us go..."

"You just think what's your life worth?" he reflects after a pause. "Just 50 Euros, that was quite incredible, very scary."

Threatening officials aside, accidental death is another real possibility that haunts every Dakar entrant. With more than 50 casualties throughout its history (Giniel puts it at about 52 or 53), including South African born motorcyclist Elmer Symons in 2007, the Grim Reaper is omnipresent in the Dakar Rally. "Yes, it's very sad," says Giniel. "But if you look at the big picture and the number of deaths over the 31 years of the rally, it gets more publicity than it should. People enter at their own risk, they know the risks and rewards, but that's why they do it. It's part of life, more people who drive on normal roads die every year, so it's all relative."

Whilst there is an element of rivalry, reveals Giniel, understandably there is also an affable atmosphere in the camp after every day's racing. "All the guys talk, there is a healthy competitive vibe, but there's also a camaraderie you won't find in Formula One," he says.

In early 2008 the Dakar Rally was cancelled due to terrorist attacks in Mauritania, so it was moved to Argentina and Chile in January 2009. Giniel describes how he and his fellow racers enjoyed the opportunity to experience some new terrain. That aside, the most noticeable difference was the number of spectators on some

of the stages, their loud Latin cheering adding vibrancy to the race, as in Africa most of the stages are deserted.

On the prestige of winning the 'Dakar' in South America and not Africa, Giniel waxes, "It's the same test, one of the most difficult rallies I've ever done, so to win it there or Africa, it's the same. I'll take it." Naturally though, it is the highlight of his career. "I always knew I had the ability to do it," he says, but is quick to concede humbly, that besides being physically and mentally prepared, winning the Dakar also took a lot of luck. He cites the example of Frenchman Stéphane Peterhansel, a six-time winner on a bike and four times in a car, who was leading by an hour in 2007 and then crashed his vehicle, yet somehow regained his overall lead and still won. "It just shows your race isn't over until it's over."

Indeed, the mettle of Giniel and his German navigator Dirk von Zitzewitz, 39, was tested in South America when they had to dodge a motorcyclist and ended up in a ditch. They weren't injured and the car was intact, but they still had to dig themselves out of trouble



"You have to stay concentrated and race your own race, because anything can happen."

Giniel and Dirk keep up a competitive pace in the long stretches of dune fields with soft sand and gravel





Cited as the toughest Dakar to date, the route included traversing the passage of the Andes twice with altitudes of up to 4 700 metres above sea level

and lost 20 minutes. Despite losing time, in this race, his closest rival and Volkswagen team-mate, and another multiple Dakar victor, Carlos Sainz of Spain, crashed into a ravine and was forced to retire, allowing De Villiers and Von Zitzewitz to squeeze through to achieve their and Volkswagen's first Dakar win. "That's where the mental strength really kicks in," he furthers. "You have to stay concentrated and race your own race, because anything can happen."

Giniel is understandably proud of his association with the Volkswagen brand and thoroughly enjoys driving the Race Touareg, the diesel version of which was entered into the Dakar for the first time this year and he calls it "the best off-road rally car in the world." He explains how he's been part of its development through racing and up to 40 000 kilometres of test-driving per annum.


Giniel also works closely with Volkswagen to choose his navigators, which involves a rigorous vetting process, whereby he drives with the candidates and gets a gut feel for them.

"Dirk joined in the beginning of 2007," says Giniel. "We have a good relationship, and share the same philosophies, which is very important; you spend so much time together you have to get on."

On the few days of the year when he's not working, Giniel de Villiers likes to mountainbike in the hills around Stellenbosch, kitesurf or play golf, and relax with his mates to take his mind off racing. "You get a lot of people that eat, sleep and drink motorsport. I like to think about new things, it would drive me nuts otherwise, you need to have balance," he says.

As yet unmarried, Giniel hopes to one day have a family but concedes that racing still comes first. "It's something I chose to do and that I enjoy doing, you have to make sacrifices to do this, and it's difficult with a family."

Whilst he is at home, Giniel also dabbles in property development with his dad, but says he doesn't have too much time for that now and can't see himself stopping driving any time soon. His age is not much of a hindrance

at this point. "My team-mate Carlos is 10 years older. I don't know if I'll be driving that long," he smiles. "Let's see." 



Giniel de Villiers talks to the press after his first Dakar victory and Volkswagen's first in its diesel-powered prototype Touareg – a two-fold triumph for Volkswagen