



PRESS INFORMATION



Hirvonen begins WRC campaign with podium in Monte Carlo

Valence, January 27th 2008 - BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen produced their best performance on the legendary Rallye Monte Carlo to finish second when the tough four-day event ended in Monaco today. The Finns, driving a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car, have never claimed a podium position on this opening round of the FIA World Rally Championship in four previous starts but held a top three place from the very first kilometre.

Team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila finished 12th in another Focus RS after a troubled rally, with Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr taking 16th in a third BP Ford Abu Dhabi car. Both finished after restarting under SuperRally rules having retired earlier in the rally. Five Fords finished in the top 10 with Focus RS cars also claiming six, ninth and 10th.

The asphalt event comprised three days of competition in the Vercors and Ardèche mountains before today's final leg in the Alpes-Maritimes, high above the rally's traditional home in Monaco. The 19 speed tests covered 362,09 km and while conditions were generally kind to competitors, patches of snow and ice lay in wait on exposed north facing slopes ready to trap the unwary.

Hirvonen claimed a secure third on the opening day before climbing to second yesterday morning. With no pressure behind and with no opportunity to chase down the leader, he eased through today's final five special stages, which included two passes over the famous Col de Turini and a spectacular test around the harbour area of Monaco's Formula 1 race circuit. He stepped onto the podium at Monaco's palace in front of Prince Albert with a 24,2 sec advantage over third-placed Chris Atkinson.

"Second is a great result for me and a perfect start to the season," said 27-year-old Hirvonen. "I've never had a good rally here so to take a podium is fantastic and it almost feels as good as a win. I started the season how I wanted to with a good result. I didn't know what to expect from this rally but my plan for the year is to finish second if I can't win a rally. When I moved into second I eased off because I was under no pressure from behind. I was uncertain how the news tyres from Pirelli would work. They were good but it's up to me to be careful on the recce when making the pace notes."

Latvala lost time when he had to change a wheel on Thursday after clipping a wall and was forced to retire yesterday afternoon after hitting a stone and breaking his car's front suspension. He restarted this morning in 14th and posted three top three times to climb to 12th. For Anttila the event marked his 50th world rally alongside Latvala and his 150th career start.

"I made two mistakes and it was a long and difficult weekend, but I found good speed today and I was happy with my times," said 22-year-old Latvala. "It's unfortunate they came three days too late. I've learned much about cutting corners with the new tyres - I can't afford to do that if I want to finish rallies. Today I also learned I have to be aggressive in turning for the tyres to work to their best."

Al Qassimi, making his debut here, retired on Friday after hitting a bank and breaking his car's suspension before recovering from 26th to 16th. "It was an incredibly difficult and technical rally but I compared my times to those of other drivers and was encouraged. I was delighted to be in the top 10 before I made my mistake and spent the rest of the event rebuilding my confidence. My relationship with my new co-driver was excellent and his WRC experience helped me with my pace notes."

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson was pleased with the team's start. "There was a lot of pressure on Mikko but he filled the slot left by Marcus Grönholm and I'm impressed with the job he did. I couldn't have asked more in terms of the result. It was a steep learning curve for Jari-Matti but he has drawn experience from the weekend and will feel the benefit later in the season," he said.

Mark Deans, Ford of Europe's motorsport director, said: "To finish the most famous rally in the championship with five cars in the top 10 leaderboard was a great result for Ford. It sets the level that we must aspire to for the rest of the season, and I'm confident we can live up to that."

Final positions

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	3hr 39min 17.0sec
2. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 41min51.4sec
3. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	3hr 42min 15.6sec
4. F Duval/E Chevailler	B	Ford Focus RS	3hr 42min16.7sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	3hr 43min 57.9sec
6. G Galli/G Bernacchini	I	Ford Focus RS	3hr 48min03.5sec
7. J-M Cuoq/P Janvier	F	Peugeot 307	3hr 49min 41.8sec
8. P-G Andersson/J Andersson	S	Suzuki SX4	3hr 50min 36.5sec
9. H Solberg/C Menkerud	N	Ford Focus RS	3hr 52min00.6sec
10 M Wilson/S Martin	GB	Ford Focus RS	3hr 53min17.1sec

Drivers

1. S Loeb	10pts
2. M Hirvonen	8pts
3. C Atkinson	6pts
4. F Duval	5pts
5. P Solberg	4pts
6. G Galli	3pts

Manufacturers

1. Citroen Total	11pts
2. Subaru	10pts
3. BP Ford Abu Dhabi	8pts
4. Stobart VK M-Sport	8pts
5. Suzuki	2pts

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