



Hirvonen takes podium for Ford on gruelling Acropolis Rally

Athens, June 1st 2008 - Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen claimed a gutsy podium finish on Acropolis Rally of Greece today as Ford maintained its lead in the manufacturers' standings of the FIA World Rally Championship. The Finns finished third in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car after one of the roughest WRC events in recent memory. Team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila were seventh in a similar Focus RS on the three-day event, which proved a matter of survival as much as pure speed.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team holds a two-point lead after seven of the 15 rounds. Hirvonen staged a determined recovery after hitting problems on each of the first two days to remain in the midst of the battle for the drivers' title. He lies second, just one point off the lead.

The Acropolis is traditionally characterised by rock-strewn gravel tracks and searing temperatures and this year was no exception. Temperatures neared 35°C and the roads were the roughest seen here in recent years. The rocks took a heavy toll on suspension parts while a combination of heat and rough roads ensured it was the toughest test yet for Pirelli's Scorpion tyres. Competitors tackled 20 speed tests covering 330,78 km north and west of Athens, with yesterday's second leg a real car breaker.

The same rogue rock in the final few kilometres of the opening day cost Hirvonen and Latvala about a minute each with damaged suspension. Hirvonen dropped a further 2 min 30sec yesterday morning when he slid into a bank, again damaging the suspension and brakes. However, the 27-year-old steered clear of trouble to recover to fourth and turned that into a podium today when third-placed Henning Solberg hit trouble.

"That was the hardest rally I've ever driven," said Hirvonen. "It was so rough and we had so many troubles that third is a great result. I've lost the championship lead but that will give me the advantage of a better start position on the next round in Turkey so it's still looking good. I saw that Henning had a problem this morning so I pushed hard. I didn't wake up this morning thinking about third, I just wanted to find good speed and secure fourth place points because I thought the time gap was too big.

"It's a nice surprise to be on the podium. It would have been difficult to beat Sébastien here but without our problems it would have been a good fight. Our emotions have been up and down and I thought we would be a long way behind Seb in the championship but it's only one point," he added.

Latvala recovered from sixth to fourth yesterday morning before a broken turbo pipe cost eight minutes and he dropped to eighth. The 23-year-old Finn gained a place today while displaying blistering speed. He won three of today's seven tests, covering 102,32 km, to add to two wins earlier.

"I saw on the recce that it was going to be a hard rally but it was much rougher than I thought. I've learned that I need to find a balance. The car is strong but I have to be aware of what I can and can't do with it. I hope I've learned that and the next round in Turkey will be better for me. If yesterday had gone well I could have had a chance of winning. I was so disappointed when we were challenging again and I kept asking myself 'why me?' But that is how it is," he said.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr finished 12th in another Focus RS. "I didn't push as hard as I wanted to because it was so rough out there. I was trying to hold nice straight lines and up my pace in the fast sections but in the narrow twisty areas I had to hold back. This has been one of the hardest rallies I have ever driven. It was a constant battle to push for pace and protect the car and getting the balance right was a challenge to the entire field," said Al Qassimi.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson said: "We have to accept that we have some issues that we need to address. From a drivers' point of view experience counted for a lot here." Mark Deans, Ford of Europe's motorsport director added: "Rallies rarely come tougher than this and I'm delighted we brought all three cars to the finish after a roller-coaster weekend. A podium was a reward for our perseverance, especially for our mechanics who worked so hard to keep the cars going."

Final positions

1. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	3hr 54min 54.7sec
2. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	3hr 56min 04.2sec
3. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 56min50.8sec
4. U Aava/K Sikk	EST	Citroen C4	3hr 59min 14.4sec
5. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	3hr 59min 44.1sec
6. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	4hr 01min06.0sec
7. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	4hr 01min42.2sec
8. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	4hr 04min08.7sec
9. T Gardemeister/T Tuominen	FIN	Suzuki SX4	4hr 05min 08.5sec
10 C Rautenbach/D Senior	ZIM	Citroen C4	4hr 08min 23.8sec

Drivers

1. S Loeb	50pts
2. M Hirvonen	49pts
3. C Atkinson	31pts
4. J-M Latvala	26pts
5. D Sordo	25pts
6. P Solberg	17pts

Manufacturers

1. BP Ford Abu Dhabi	81pts
2. Citroen Total	79pts
3. Subaru	50pts
4. Stobart VK M-Sport	37pts
5. Munchi's Ford	16pts
6. Suzuki	10pts

###

Images available at www.worldrallypics.com/ford

For more information:

Jo Declercq

Tel: +32 2 482 21 03

jdecler2@ford.com