



Hirvonen claims second for Ford after epic battle in Finland

Jyväskylä (Finland), August 3rd 2008 - BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen finished second in Rally Finland today after a thrilling duel with arch-rival Sébastien Loeb during the four-day event. The Finns' seventh podium in nine rallies this year preserves their lead in the FIA World Rally Championship driver standings and keeps Ford on top in the manufacturers' series with the record-breaking Focus RS World Rally Car.

Hirvonen and Loeb fought for every second over the blisteringly fast roller-coaster roads of central Finland. The gap between the duelling drivers never rose above 18,2 sec over the 24 speed tests covering 340,42 km, and despite Hirvonen's final day attack in the forest stages east of his home town of Jyväskylä, he ended this fastest round of the season just 9,0 sec behind Loeb.

Finland is regarded as rallying's home and is one of the most specialised events of the season. Famous for its wide, hard roads and stomach-churning jumps, this year's rally also included several narrower sections to test the drivers. Precision driving and bravery are more important here than anywhere else as the fast roads offer little room for error. Such was the pace that average speeds topped 126 kph and the fierce battle for victory left third-placed Chris Atkinson more than 3 min 15 sec adrift.

The battle produced a familiar pattern. As soon as one driver eked out a few seconds over his rival, the other would respond on the next stage to keep the margin stable. Hirvonen won six stages and relished the fight with Loeb, during which he made no mistakes despite constant on-the-limit driving.

"I'm pleased with my driving but I came here to win and Loeb found a few seconds more. We played cat and mouse all weekend and when I won a stage, he usually won the next. For there to be only nine seconds between us after all this crazy driving is amazing. I lost the time by not being brave enough in the narrow sections. It'll be difficult but we must now fight for the win on every round."

"It was a fantastic rally and an amazing fight and it's unfortunate I didn't win in front of my home fans. I pushed right to the end but it wasn't enough. I'm pleased to still lead the championship but one point isn't much. The speed was crazy. Sometimes we could have thrown our pace notes away and just gone for it and I've learned that I could have made my notes quicker," he added.

Team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila finished 39th after a first day accident ended their chances of victory. After breaking a steering arm against a large rock and crashing off the road, the 23-year-old Finnish driver retired from the day, returning to the action yesterday under SupeRally rules with a 45 minute penalty. He concentrated on rebuilding his speed and confidence and went on to claim four stage wins.



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"The rally didn't go as I expected unfortunately and I didn't achieve what I wanted, which was a podium. I feel quite empty. It ended for me on Friday morning and that was all due to an error I made on the recce when I didn't mark a rock in my pace notes. At least I got my confidence, rhythm and speed back and drove the new stages which is good for the future. It was difficult to be motivated but the best medicine after an accident is to get back behind the wheel. I know the speed is there so I hope that next year I'll have the chance to fight for a win here," he said.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr finished 11th in the team's other Focus RS. This was an excellent result, especially as I haven't competed for over two months. It was difficult to find the required balance of attacking hard enough and being cautious over the huge crests. One error on the big jumps is enough to drain a drivers' confidence and this is the ultimate 'confidence' event. I'm looking forward to the next rally in Germany which is a very different kind of rally," said Al Qassimi.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson said: "This wasn't the result we were looking for but having lost Jari-Matti so early, it made it more difficult for Mikko because he had to think about both championships. He delivered an incredible performance and learned a lot having to battle with Loeb for three days, which will make him stronger. They were 0,5sec/km quicker than the rest of the field and I think Mikko drove better than last year which is a big achievement."

Ford of Europe motorsport director Mark Deans said: "Tens of thousands of spectators packed the forests to see the action, while the service park in the centre of Jyväskylä provided great entertainment in itself for entire families and generated the kind of atmosphere for which Finland is renowned. Once again this rally has shown it is the championship's benchmark that every event must aspire to match."

Final positions

1. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	2hr 54min 05,5sec
2. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 54min 14,5sec
3. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	2hr 57min 22,5sec
4. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	2hr 57min 36,4sec
5. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	2hr 58min 03,2sec
6. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	2hr 58min 09,6sec
7. M Rantanen/J Lönegren	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 00min 16,6sec
8. T Gardemeister/T Tuominen	FIN	Suzuki SX4	3hr 02min 24,2sec
9. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	3hr 02min 42,8sec
10 C Rautenbach/D Senior	ZIM	Citroen C4	3hr 04min 36,4sec



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Drivers

1. M Hirvonen	67pts
2. S Loeb	66pts
3. C Atkinson	37pts
4. D Sordo	35pts
5. J-M Latvala	34pts
6. P Solberg	23pts

Manufacturers

1. BP Ford Abu Dhabi	108pts
2. Citroen Total	105pts
3. Subaru	62pts
4. Stobart VK M-Sport	45pts
5. Munchi's Ford	19pts
6. Suzuki	12pts

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Pictures on www.fordpress.be.

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