



Grönholm chases Rallye Monte Carlo podium for BP-Ford

BP-Ford World Rally Team remains on course for both a podium finish and a solid points haul after today's second leg of the Rallye Monte Carlo, first round of the FIA World Rally Championship. Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen were unchallenged for third in their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car while team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen hold fifth in a similar car.

However, neither had a troublefree day in the Ardèche mountains in central France, south-west of the rally base in Valence. Grönholm overcame gearbox difficulties this morning while tyre selection that proved too soft hindered both during the 150.62km of competition, split over two identical loops of three asphalt speed tests. The opening special stage of each loop was a massive 46.02km, one of the longest tests of the season.

Once more there was no sign of the snow and ice which traditionally makes this event so treacherous. After a damp early morning, clear skies and warm sunshine made it feel more like early spring than the middle of winter. Temperatures climbed to 14°C in the mountains and rather than pondering what choice of studded tyres to opt for to match the ice, teams were choosing medium compound dry weather asphalt rubber.

Grönholm was third fastest on all three stages of the morning loop, in his Focus RS, despite gearbox troubles. "I had gear selection problems which began about 10km after the start of the first stage," said the 38-year-old Finn. "Sometimes the paddle gearchange on the steering wheel worked and on other occasions I had to use the manual system. It worked again for the middle stage but it seized on the final test and I had to drive the road section back to service with the gearbox stuck in third." The team fitted a replacement gearbox to restore the car to full health.

Two more third fastest and one fourth quickest time during the repeated stages in the afternoon left Grönholm 1min 14.6sec clear of fourth-placed Chris Atkinson. However, Grönholm felt uncomfortable with his tyre selection. "I struggled a little because they were too soft for the warmer weather," he said. "I was always one step softer than what I needed. The problem was that we didn't choose harder rubber before the rally because we thought the weather would be wetter and cooler. It wasn't an easy day and it was difficult to set the same pace as Loeb. But a podium would be OK for me because from the next rally onwards we will be quicker."

Hirvonen started the leg in fourth but was unhappy with his morning's work. The 26-year-old Finn felt both his tyre choice and the car's settings were too soft for the conditions and he slipped to seventh. "I didn't have confidence because the tyres were moving around and the suspension was too soft," he explained. "I thought the tyre choice would be good because it was damp but it didn't work and I had a better feeling in the drier stages. In these warm conditions we have to think about this as a pure asphalt rally and not a traditional Monte Carlo Rally."

After changing to stiffer settings for the afternoon, Hirvonen's confidence improved. He climbed to fifth on harder compound tyres and ended the leg 17.2sec behind Atkinson and in the middle of a four-car battle. "The set-up was much better this afternoon. I had more grip and the car was more precise. I came here wanting a top five finish and I am in that fight so I'm happy," he added.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson said he was happy with the performance of the Focus RS. "However, I'm disappointed we had a gearchange problem. But if Marcus can maintain his position and if Mikko can move up, then it is a great platform on which to build for the rest of the year."



News from our Rivals

World champion Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) extended his overnight advantage from 23.9sec to 25.2sec but there was more to the day than that. Team-mate Dani Sordo blitzed the long stage more than 16sec quicker than the Frenchman and ended the morning just 6.6sec behind. However, Loeb repaid the compliment on the re-run this afternoon to claw back more than 17sec, despite missing a braking point and side-swiping a bridge. Each driver won three stages. Behind Grönholm, Chris Atkinson (Subaru) climbed to fourth, the Australian impressing on his first asphalt event in the team's 2006 car. Toni Gardemeister (Mitsubishi) moved up to sixth, but Petter Solberg (Subaru) lost time this morning on tyres that were too hard and slipped to ninth, before recovering to seventh. Manfred Stohl (Citroen) climbed to fifth but a broken front brake calliper on stage six left rear brakes only and he lost two minutes during the afternoon, sliding to 11th. Xevi Pons (Mitsubishi) retired in the opening stage with a broken gearbox.

Tomorrow's Route

The final leg takes competitors further north into the Haute-Loire region. After leaving Valence at 06.00 drivers tackle two identical loops of three stages, split by a return to the city for late morning service. The middle test of each group is the classic 25.93km St-Bonnet-le-Froid, a legendary Monte Carlo stage. Drivers tackle 128.72km of competition before a free transit section to Monaco ahead of Sunday morning's super special stage around the harbour area of the Grand Prix circuit.

Leaderboard after Leg 2

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	1hr 57min 41.1sec
2. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	1hr 58min 06.3sec
3. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 58min 56.8sec
4. C Atkinson/G MacNeall	AUS	Subaru Impreza	2hr 00min 11.4sec
5. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 00min 28.6sec
6. T Gardemeister/J Honkanen	FIN	Mitsubishi Lancer	2hr 00min 35.3sec
7. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	2hr 00min 46.7sec
8. J Kopecky/F Schovanek	CZ	Skoda Fabia	2hr 01min 26.6sec
9. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 01min 53.2sec
10 J-M Cuoq/D Marty	F	Peugeot 307	2hr 02min 12.1sec

Stage Times

Stage 3: 1. Sordo 29min 43.4sec; 2. Loeb + 16.2; **3. Grönholm + 17.7**; 4. Atkinson + 20.1; 5. Gardemeister + 26.7; 6. Stohl + 31.3; **9. Hirvonen + 58.1**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 53min 29.5sec; 2. Sordo + 7.7; **3. Grönholm + 30.6**; 4. Atkinson + 1:04.0; 5. Gardemeister + 1:16.6; 6. Stohl + 1:16.8; **7. Hirvonen + 1:33.6**.

Stage 4: 1. Loeb 9min 39.3sec; 2. Sordo + 0.1; **3. Grönholm + 3.7**; 4. P Solberg + 11.1; 5. Latvala + 12.3; **6. Hirvonen + 12.7**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 03min 08.8sec; 2. Sordo + 7.8; **3. Grönholm + 34.3**; 4. Atkinson + 1:20.3; 5. Stohl + 1:29.8; 6. Gardemeister + 1:31.9; **7. Hirvonen + 1:46.3**.



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Stage 5: 1. Sordo 8min 00.7sec; 2. Loeb + 1.2; **3. Grönholm + 3.1;** 4. P Solberg + 5.2; **5. Hirvonen + 6.2;** 6. Gardemeister, Stohl + 8.2.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 11min 10.7sec; 2. Sordo + 6.6; **3. Grönholm + 36.2;** 4. Atkinson + 1:34.1; 5. Stohl + 1:36.8; 6. Gardemeister + 1:38.9; **7. Hirvonen + 1:51.3.**

Stage 6: 1. Loeb 28min 29.7sec; 2. Sordo + 17.1; **3. Grönholm + 24.4;** **4. Hirvonen + 30.0;** 5. Atkinson + 31.1; 6. P Solberg + 40.6.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 39min 40.4sec; 2. Sordo + 23.7; **3. Grönholm + 1:00.6;** 4. Atkinson + 2:05.2; **5. Hirvonen + 2:21.3;** 6. Gardemeister + 2:33.2.

Stage 7: 1. Sordo 9min 43.2sec; 2. Loeb + 1.1; **3. Grönholm + 6.1;** 4. Atkinson + 7.1; 5. P Solberg + 8.6; 6. Gardemeister + 11.2; **7. Hirvonen + 12.3.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 49min 24.7sec; 2. Sordo + 22.6; **3. Grönholm + 1:05.6;** 4. Atkinson + 2:11.2; **5. Hirvonen + 2:32.5;** 6. Gardemeister + 2:43.3.

Stage 8: 1. Loeb 8min 16.4sec; 2. Sordo + 2.6; 3. Cuoq + 9.7; **4. Grönholm + 10.1;** 5. Gardemeister + 10.9; 6. P Solberg + 14.4; **7. Hirvonen + 15.0.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 57min 41.1sec; 2. Sordo + 25.2; **3. Grönholm + 1:15.7;** 4. Atkinson + 2:30.3; **5. Hirvonen + 2:47.5;** 6. Gardemeister + 2:54.2.

For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Baskerville on the **BP-Ford World Rally Team** media desk in Valence Tel: + 33 4 75 82 43 28 Photographs are available on www.worldrallypics.com/ford