



Grönholm claims podium for BP-Ford in Rallye Monte Carlo

BP-Ford World Rally Team drivers Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen delivered a successful start to the FIA World Rally Championship season for the reigning manufacturers' champions by taking a podium finish on the Rallye Monte Carlo today. The Finns finished third in a Focus RS World Rally Car after four days of tough driving on the most famous rally in the calendar.

Team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen finished fifth in a similar Focus RS to ensure a strong start to the season for the BP-Ford team, which lies second in the manufacturers' standings. They were edged out of fourth by just 0.2sec after a thrilling battle with Chris Atkinson was concluded on this morning's final speed test around the harbour of Monaco's Grand Prix circuit.

After three days' competition in the Ardèche and Vercors mountain regions of central France in unseasonably mild weather, the rally headed south overnight to Monaco, the traditional home of this opening round of the series. A 2.80km super special stage, with two drivers starting at the same time on opposite sides of the swimming pool complex, provided tremendous entertainment for the huge crowds lining the famous roads.

Drivers had to use unstudded snow tyres and the reduced grip offered by the rubber increased the spectacle as they slid their vehicles around asphalt bends more usually tackled by F1 machinery.

Thirty-eight-year-old Grönholm was paired with Atkinson in what proved the fastest heat of the morning. The Australian edged out Grönholm by 0.5sec but the Finn's time was good enough for second in the stage. "It was good fun driving around the GP circuit on snow tyres," said Grönholm. "The reduced grip meant I could slide the car around a lot and put on some good entertainment for the fans. I was under no pressure from behind so I could relax and enjoy it.

"It didn't seem like the Rallye Monte Carlo because the weather was so strange. It seemed more like a really difficult asphalt rally with the wrong tyres. There wasn't such a big difference between my pace and that of Seb compared with last year. It was a shame we had a gearbox problem on Friday but our time loss wasn't so great," he added.

Hirvonen was paired with Petter Solberg and the BP-Ford driver started the test in fourth with a slender 0.8sec advantage over Atkinson after a thrilling battle yesterday. Hirvonen comfortably defeated the Norwegian but his time was exactly one second slower than Atkinson, meaning he slipped from fourth by just 0.2sec after more than 328km of competition.

"I'm really disappointed to lose fourth but happy with the way the weekend went," said Hirvonen. "I enjoyed a brilliant fight with Chris and just lost out. But full credit to him, he won fair and square. We struggled a little throughout the rally with our set-up and tyres. I really wanted fourth but this is a solid start to the championship and although I feel disappointed now, it's a good result and one I would have been happy with before the start."

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson was pleased with the weekend. "This represents a good, solid start to the defence of our title," he said. "It's a shame Mikko couldn't retain fourth but it was a thrilling way for the rally to end and shows how competitive the championship is going to be." Ford TeamRS director Jost Capito said: "Already we have seen that the competition looks like being closer than last year and that is good for the sport. It will be tough to defend our manufacturers' title but that is a challenge we are ready to take and one that we relish."



News from our Rivals

Reigning world champion Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) began the defence of his title in style with his fourth Rallye Monte Carlo success on the competition debut of the French's manufacturer's C4 car. His winning margin was 38.2sec over team-mate Dani Sordo and marked a successful return to the championship for the official factory team after a 12-month sabbatical. Behind Grönholm, fourth place for Chris Atkinson (Subaru) was a good result on his first asphalt rally in the team's 2006 car. Team-mate Petter Solberg rounded off the top six. Tenth place for Manfred Stohl (Citroen) and 14th for Henning Solberg (Ford) were sufficient to take the final manufacturers' points for the OMV Kronos Citroen and Stobart M-Sport Ford teams respectively.

Next round

The championship heads to Scandinavia next month for the first of two winter rallies on successive weekends. The Swedish Rally (8 - 11 February) is based in Karlstad and features three days of competition on ice and snow bound gravel tracks.

Final positions

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	3hr 10min 27.4sec
2. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	3hr 11min 05.6sec
3. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 11min 50.2sec
4. C Atkinson/G MacNeall	AUS	Subaru Impreza	3hr 12min 55.5sec
5. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 12min 55.7sec
6. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	3hr 13min 39.4sec
7. T Gardemeister/J Honkkanen	FIN	Mitsubishi Lancer	3hr 14min 05.5sec
8. J Kopecky/F Schovanek	CZ	Skoda Fabia	3hr 15min 06.8sec
9. J-M Cuoq/D Marty	F	Peugeot 307	3hr 16min 27.1sec
10 M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	3hr 17min 04.7sec

Drivers

1. S Loeb	10pts
2. D Sordo	8pts
3. M Grönholm	6pts
4. C Atkinson	5pts
5. M Hirvonen	4pts
6. P Solberg	3pts

Manufacturers

1. Citroen Total	18pts
2. BP-Ford	10pts
3. Subaru	8pts
4. OMV Kronos Citroen	2pts
5. Stobart M-Sport Ford	1pt

Stage Times

Stage 15: 1. Atkinson 1min 49.9sec; 2. Grönholm + 0.5; **3. Hirvonen + 1.0**; 4. Gardemeister + 1.1; 5. Loeb + 1.3; 6. Stohl + 2.9.

Overall: 1. Loeb 3hr 10min 27.4sec; 2. Sordo + 38.2; **3. Grönholm + 1:22.8**; 4. Atkinson + 2:28.1; **5. Hirvonen + 2:28.3**; 6. P Solberg + 3:12.0.

For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Baskerville on the **BP-Ford World Rally Team** media desk in Monte Carlo Tel: + 44 7770 756214 / + 44 7879 438993

Photographs are available on www.worldrallypics.com/ford