



Grönholm and Hirvonen take double podium for Ford in Mexico

Mexico, 11th of March 2007 - BP-Ford World Rally Team claimed a double podium finish on Rally Mexico today to retain its lead of both the manufacturers' and drivers' standings in the FIA World Rally Championship. Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen finished second in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car on the demanding three-day gravel event in the mountains of central Mexico, while team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen were third in another Focus RS.

The result means reigning manufacturers' champion BP-Ford holds a 15-point lead in the series after four of the 16 rounds. Thirty-nine-year-old Grönholm leads the drivers' standings by four points with Hirvonen in third, just two points behind second-placed Sébastien Loeb.

As the first gravel round of the season, the dominant surface of the championship, Rally Mexico was viewed as the first true form guide for the year. Drivers tackled 20 speed tests covering 366.06km over dusty gravel tracks north and east of the rally base in León. The special stages climbed to more than 2700m and the thinner air at that altitude made it hard for engines to 'breathe'. As a result power output was reduced by about 30 per cent on usual levels.

Grönholm overcame a small engine sensor problem on the opening day to climb to second yesterday. With no pressure from behind the Finn was able to pace himself through today's four speed tests covering 62.06km to finish 55.8sec behind Loeb. He won six speed tests in the three legs.

"It didn't look so good for us on Friday when we were fifth but we recovered well," he said. "I found a good feeling with the car yesterday morning and from then on everything was perfect. We're still leading both championships although Seb has closed on us a little here and I want to do better on the next round in Portugal. The lack of power in the mountains was obvious all rally but that's the same for everyone and I had to get used to it.

"It wasn't a hard rally for tyres and everyone made pretty much the same choices throughout. If Seb wins it's crucial for me to finish second to ensure we don't drop many points. That's what happened here but I hope we can reverse the situation on the next rally," he added.

Hirvonen started the final leg in fourth, just 2.8sec behind Dani Sordo, after spinning out of third yesterday afternoon. However, the 26-year-old Finn regained the podium place on this morning's opening stage and pulled clear to head the Spaniard by 16.0sec. "I'm happy to take another six points after yesterday's spin," he said. "I lost the fight for second yesterday when I made a mistake but that was my fault. My speed is getting closer to Seb and Marcus all the time so that's encouraging.

"I think the whole season will be close like this with some good battles between the top drivers and that's good for the championship and also enjoyable for us. I had a good feeling here with both my driving and the car and the stages were good. We were at a disadvantage on the opening day when Marcus and I started first on the loose gravel but there was nothing we could do about that," he said.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson was pleased with the performance. "Marcus and Mikko both drove well after having the worst of the road conditions on the first leg. They both recovered well after setbacks and Mikko did what we wanted today by getting back in front of Dani Sordo. We still lead both championships and that's a healthy position to be in," he said.



Ford TeamRS director Jost Capito said: "This was another good result by the team to keep a clear gap at the head of both the drivers' and manufacturers' championships. Five of the nine Focus RS World Rally Cars that started finished in the top 10, underlining its performance and reliability."

News from our Rivals

Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) claimed his 30th career victory and the first on gravel for the new C4 car. He climbed to second in the drivers' championship. Team-mate Dani Sordo took fourth behind the BP-Ford duo. Chris Atkinson (Subaru) was fifth on the debut of the new Impreza car, but the Australian was unhappy with his car's set-up today and was unable to challenge for fourth. Manfred Stohl (Citroen) completed the top six while Stobart VK M-Sport team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Matthew Wilson (Ford) took the final drivers' points in seventh and eighth. Team-mate Henning Solberg recovered from his first day roll to take the final manufacturers' point in ninth.

Next round

Rally de Portugal (29 March - 1 April) returns to the championship for the first time since 2001. This fifth round of the series has a new structure and the all-gravel event is based at Vilamoura in the Algarve on Portugal's southern coast.

Final positions

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	3hr 48min 13.3sec
2. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 49min 09.1sec
3. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 49min 41.0sec
4. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	3hr 49min 57.0sec
5. C Atkinson/G MacNeall	AUS	Subaru Impreza	3hr 50min 37.4sec
6. M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	3hr 51min 58.8sec
7. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 52min 24.1sec
8. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	4hr 00min 35.9sec
9. H Solberg/C Menkerud	N	Ford Focus RS	4hr 02min 29.0sec
10 M Higgins/S Martin	GB	Mitsubishi Lancer	4hr 08min 44.5sec

Drivers

1. M Grönholm	32pts
2. S Loeb	28pts
3. M Hirvonen	26pts
4. D Sordo	13pts
5. H Solberg	11pts
6. C Atkinson	10pts

Manufacturers

1. BP-Ford	58pts
2. Citroen Total	43pts
3. Stobart VK M-Sport Ford	19pts
4. Subaru	19pts
5. OMV Kronos Citroen	17pts

For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Baskerville on the **BP-Ford World Rally Team** media desk in León Tel: + 52 477 711 4363 Photographs are available on www.worldrallypics.com/ford or www.fordpress.be section "pictures".

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