



BP-Ford leads world championship after 1-2 finish in Norway

Norway, 18 February 2007 - BP-Ford World Rally Team took a decisive lead in the FIA World Rally Championship today after dominating Rally Norway with the Focus RS World Rally Car to finish first and second. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen led from start to finish to claim their second WRC victory, finishing 9.5sec ahead of team-mates and fellow Finns Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen.

It was BP-Ford's second win in consecutive weeks after Grönholm triumphed in Sweden seven days ago and powered the reigning manufacturers' world champions into a 16 point lead after three of the 16 rounds. Grönholm moved to the head of the drivers' series, four points clear of Hirvonen.

Focus RS cars completed a clean sweep of the podium places as Henning Solberg and Cato Menkerud, driving for the Stobart VK M-Sport Ford team, finished third to match their career-best result. It was the first time Ford has filled all three podium places since 1979 when Hannu Mikkola led a trio of Escorts into the top three in Rally New Zealand, 356 rallies ago.

Huge crowds packed the Norwegian countryside north of Oslo to celebrate their country's first appearance in the WRC and the biggest sporting event in Norway since the 1994 Winter Olympics. Three days of rugged driving in treacherous conditions in the forests near Kongsvinger and the hills around Lillehammer demanded impeccable reliability from the Focus RS cars and the utmost skill from Hirvonen and Grönholm. They faced deep snow, ice, fog and rain during the 18 speed tests covering 355.99km but held the top two positions from the opening kilometre.

Hirvonen started today's third leg with a 19.3sec advantage over his 39-year-old team-mate. With their closest pursuers almost 3min 30sec behind, the BP-Ford duo could afford to pace themselves through the final four special stages covering 97.10km. Grönholm ended the event in style by winning the final test, his fourth of the rally. Hirvonen also claimed four stage wins.

"I'm so relieved the rally is over," said 26-year-old Hirvonen. "I've led since the start and battled with Marcus and Loeb since Friday morning. I've beaten them both here fair and square after a great fight. Although I won in Australia last year, I didn't have to overcome their challenge then so I regard this as my first 'real' WRC win. It certainly made a difference that this was a new rally. Nobody had previous experience of the stages and that made things more equal.

"Neither Marcus nor I had to drive at maximum speed today. But in those circumstances it's easy to relax and make a mistake. I tried to concentrate on every single corner and followed Marcus' split times. The stages were so enjoyable but at the same time they were extremely difficult. Yesterday we had blizzard conditions on one test and I don't think I've ever driven a stage like that," he added.

Grönholm has now finished on the podium on all three rallies this season. "I'm leading the drivers' championships and BP-Ford leads the manufacturers' series so it doesn't get any better," he said. "It was a difficult weekend with plenty of snow and narrow roads. I wasn't completely happy with my own performance because I couldn't find a perfect rhythm. But looking at the last two weeks as a whole, I have to be happy to take a win and a second place," he said.



It was a perfect birthday weekend for BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson, who was 51 yesterday. "It was an intense three days but this is a fantastic result. Mikko led from the start and was under pressure throughout. He held his pace and never looked like losing his lead. Once Loeb lost time we had a big advantage and it would have been crazy to let Mikko and Marcus battle it out. We told them to hold position, make no mistakes and bring home maximum points," he said.

Ford TeamRS director Jost Capito was delighted with the Blue Oval's clean sweep of the podium. "It's a great moment for Ford," he said. "We hoped there would be the opportunity to claim the top three places at some point during the season but we never expected it to happen this early. It's a perfect reflection of how competitive the Focus RS WRC is."

News from our Rivals

Norway's Solberg brothers delighted the fans with an exciting battle for third. Petter (Subaru) held a 9.9sec lead over Henning (Ford) last night. But Petter struggled with studs that were too short for the snowy conditions and Henning moved ahead on the opening test and held his advantage, despite stalling at the start of the final stage. Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) brought his Focus RS home in fifth. The battle between Manfred Stohl (Citroen) and Gigi Galli (Citroen) for sixth ended when Stohl went off the road for 10 minutes on the final stage. Xavi Pons (Mitsubishi) and Daniel Carlsson (Citroen) battled hard throughout the day until Pons crashed out on the last test. Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) set two fastest times today to finish 14th and take the final manufacturers' point.

Next round

The championship moves onto gravel, the series' dominant surface, and out of Europe for the first time this season for round four. Rally Mexico is based in León on 8 - 11 March.

Final positions

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS 3hr 28min 17.0sec
2. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS 3hr 28min 26.5sec
3. H Solberg/C Menkerud	N	Ford Focus RS 3hr 32min 01.6sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza 3hr 32min 18.1sec
5. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS 3hr 33min 47.7sec
6. G Galli/G Bernacchini	I	Citroen Xsara 3hr 35min 22.2sec
7. D Carlsson/D Giraudet	S	Citroen Xsara 3hr 37min 40.7sec
8. J Kopecky/F Schovanek	CZ	Skoda Fabia 3hr 40min 06.9sec
9. R Dalsjø/J Løvhøiden	N	Subaru Impreza 3hr 41min 48.8sec
10 A Mikkelsen/O Fløene	N	Ford Focus RS 3hr 42min 45.7sec

Drivers

1. M Grönholm	24pts
2. M Hirvonen	20pts
3. S Loeb	18pts
4. H Solberg	11pts
5. D Sordo	8pts
6. P Solberg	8pts

Manufacturers

1. BP-Ford	44pts
2. Citroen Total	28pts
3. Stobart VK M-Sport Ford	16pts
4. Subaru	15pts
5. OMV Kronos Citroen	14pts

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