

For immediate release: 26 October 2007

Hirvonen takes charge for Ford on opening leg of Rally Japan

BP-Ford World Rally Team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen lead Rally Japan after today's dramatic opening leg in which three frontrunners were sidelined. The Finns returned to the rally base in Obihiro with a 10.3sec advantage in their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car after a long and tiring day's competition in the forests north-east of the city.

There was bitter disappointment for team-mates Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen. The FIA World Rally Championship leaders crashed into a tree stump on the final speed test of this morning's competition while leading the rally. The heavy impact damaged the roll cage on their Focus RS and although the car was mechanically sound, the Finns were prevented from continuing for safety reasons. They will not restart tomorrow.

An estimated 64,000 people attended last night's start ceremony in Obihiro for this 14th round of the championship on Japan's most northerly island of Hokkaido. The competition began for real today with two identical loops of gravel special stages on fast but narrow roads north-east of Obihiro, before two passes over a purpose-built super special stage on the edge of the city. The 10 stages covered 106.18km.

Thick early morning fog combined with the low angle of the rising sun to make visibility difficult initially, while ice added to the challenge. As the temperatures rose, the roads dried and competitors encountered dust during the afternoon tests before heavy rain fell this evening. BFGoodrich's extra-soft tyres were required this morning while Hirvonen opted for a soft compound this afternoon.

The 27-year-old was fourth on the opening stage but climbed to second by the end of the morning loop, just 5.0sec behind Jari-Matti Latvala. He won two stages this afternoon to take the lead and gradually build a slender overnight lead over Sébastien Loeb and Latvala.

"Leading is always the best position to be in but I know there are two difficult days to come," said Hirvonen. "I have the same fantastic feeling with the car that I had during Rally Finland in August. Conditions this morning were difficult with fog and ice on roads that were narrow and slippery but we survived. Visibility was down to 100m on the first stage. It was a shock to lose Marcus and now I have to drive to win to help his title chances.

"Tomorrow will be especially hard because there are long stages and a lot of kilometres and after the rain tonight the roads will be extremely slippery. They are even narrower than today and one mistake could prove costly," added Hirvonen.

BP-Ford team-mate Grönholm took the lead on the third stage but went off the road in the following 2.73km Rikubetsu test, dropping a minute and damaging the roll cage inside the door on his side of the car. The damage was too great for Grönholm to continue for safety reasons and he retired from the day's action. The team and FIA technical officials then examined the point of impact in greater detail to determine whether repairs could be made to allow Grönholm to restart tomorrow under SuperRally regulations. However, additional damage was found to the mounting where the door

bars link to the main hoop of the roll cage and Grönholm was ruled out for the rest of the rally.

"The accident happened at a third gear corner at a point in the stage where I changed my pace notes during the recce," he said. "It's faster there this year because some trees have been cut down. I slid wide and the right rear wheel hit some straw bales. The impact threw the car down a bank into a tree stump. The impact was hard and on my door. The stage was covered with loose gravel and was slippery all the way through.

"The drivers' title is still open, whatever the result here, but a non-finish obviously makes it more difficult. The accident was similar to the one in Australia last year when I went off the road and hit some tree stumps. That cost me the title so I hope it works out a different way this season," he added.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson reflected on a day of delight and disappointment. "We've had a fantastic run this season but the team is obviously disappointed for Marcus," he said. "It was unfortunate the roll cage was damaged because otherwise the car was fine. It was a great drive by Mikko and I hope he and Jari-Matti Latvala can work to keep our title hopes on course."

News from our rivals

Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) powered his Focus RS into an early lead on his 50th WRC start before Grönholm moved to the front. Following the demise of the BP-Ford driver, Latvala retook the lead and stayed there until Hirvonen moved ahead early this afternoon. Latvala won two stages and held off the challenge of Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) until the penultimate test. The gap between the duo is just 3.4sec. Dani Sordo (Citroen) won two stages to climb to fourth, despite a third stage spin, ahead of Henning Solberg (Ford) who is an excellent fifth on his Japanese debut. Petter Solberg (Subaru) went off briefly in stage five and then retired from sixth on the liaison section after the test with gear selection problems. Team-mate Chris Atkinson spun on the second stage but worse was to befall the Australian when he crashed heavily on stage six.

Tomorrow's route

The second leg is the longest of the rally and is based slightly further west than today's action. After a 05.05 start competitors face a daunting 14 hours behind the wheel before the day finally ends at 19.05. They face two identical loops of four tests before two more passes over the Obihiro super special stage in the evening – a total of 146.68km of competition.

Leaderboard after Leg 1

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 00min 30.8sec
2. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	1hr 00min 41.1sec
3. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 00min 44.5sec
4. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	1hr 01min 11.4sec
5. H Solberg/C Menkerud	N	Ford Focus RS	1hr 01min 19.2sec
6. M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	1hr 02min 00.8sec
7. X Pons/X Amigo	E	Subaru Impreza	1hr 02min 33.4sec
8. L Perez Companc/J-M Volta	ARG	Ford Focus RS	1hr 02min 51.6sec
9. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	1hr 03min 21.6sec

10 F Villagra/J Perez Companc ARG

Ford Focus RS

1hr 03min 57.2sec

Stage Times

Stage 1: 1. Latvala 4min 48.9sec; 2. Loeb + 0.4; 3. Atkinson + 0.6; **4. Hirvonen + 1.3**; **5. Grönholm + 1.9**; 6. P Solberg + 2.8.

Stage 2: **1. Grönholm 8min 29.7sec**; 2. Latvala + 0.3; **3. Hirvonen + 4.0**; 4. H Solberg + 9.1; 5. Sordo + 10.0; 6. Stohl + 11.2.

Overall: 1. Latvala 13min 18.9sec; **2. Grönholm + 1.6**; **3. Hirvonen + 5.0**; 4. Loeb + 12.7; 5. P Solberg + 14.6; 6. Sordo + 16.1.

Stage 3: 1. Loeb 13min 56.0sec; **2. Grönholm + 4.4**; 3. Latvala + 7.0; **4. Hirvonen + 7.4**; 5. H Solberg + 12.9; 6. Sordo + 18.4.

Overall: **1. Grönholm 27min 20.9sec**; 2. Latvala + 1.0; **3. Hirvonen + 6.4**; 4. Loeb + 6.7; 5. H Solberg + 23.1; 6. Sordo + 28.5.

Stage 4: 1. Sordo 2min 05.4sec; **2. Hirvonen + 0.4**; 3. P Solberg + 0.5; 4. H Solberg + 0.9; 5. Latvala + 0.8; 6. Loeb + 1.2; **76. Grönholm + 1:00.1**.

Overall: 1. Latvala 29min 28.1sec; **2. Hirvonen + 5.0**; 3. Loeb + 6.1; 4. H Solberg + 22.0; 5. Sordo + 26.7; 6. P Solberg + 27.2; **8. Grönholm + 58.3**.

Stage 5: 1. Latvala 4min 39.1sec; **2. Hirvonen + 1.2**; 3. Loeb + 1.3; 4. Atkinson + 2.4; 5. Sordo + 3.1; 6. Stohl + 3.6;

Overall: 1. Latvala 34min 07.2sec; **2. Hirvonen + 6.2**; 3. Loeb + 7.4; 4. Sordo + 29.8; 5. H Solberg + 31.7; 6. P Solberg + 37.6.

Stage 6: **1. Hirvonen 8min 09.0sec**; 2. Loeb + 2.9; 3. Latvala + 7.6; 4. H Solberg + 8.1; 5. Sordo + 8.6; 6. Stohl + 17.0.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 42min 22.4sec**; 2. Latvala + 1.4; 3. Loeb + 4.1; 4. Sordo + 32.2; 5. H Solberg + 33.6; 6. Stohl + 58.7.

Stage 7: **1. Hirvonen 13min 26.7sec**; 2. Loeb + 5.5; 3. Latvala + 7.3; 4. Sordo + 9.6; 5. H Solberg + 10.7; 6. Stohl 25.6.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 55min 49.1sec**; 2. Latvala + 8.7; 3. Loeb + 9.6; 4. Sordo + 41.8; 5. H Solberg + 44.3; 6. Stohl + 1:24.3.

Stage 8: 1. Sordo 2min 04.2sec; **2. Hirvonen + 0.3**; 3. Latvala + 0.9; 4. Loeb + 1.6; 5. H Solberg + 1.9; 6. Stohl 2.6.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 57min 53.6sec**; 2. Latvala + 9.3; 3. Loeb + 10.9; 4. Sordo + 41.5; 5. H Solberg + 45.9; 6. Stohl + 1:26.6.

Stage 9: 1. Araujo 1min 18.5sec; 2. Sordo + 0.4; 3. Loeb + 0.6; **4. Hirvonen + 0.7**; 5= Perez Companc, Villagra + 0.8.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 59min 12.8sec**; 2. Loeb + 10.8; 3. Latvala + 12.6; 4. Sordo + 41.2; 5. H Solberg + 47.2; 6. Stohl + 1:28.0.

Stage 10: 1. Pons 1min 16.8sec; 2. Sordo + 0.6; 3= Loeb, Villagra + 0.7; 5. Araujo + 1.0; **6. Hirvonen + 1.2**.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 1hr 00min 30.8sec**; 2. Loeb + 10.3; 3. Latvala + 13.7; 4. Sordo + 40.6; 5. H Solberg + 48.4; 6. Stohl + 1:30.0.