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## **Hirvonen builds Ford's Rally Japan lead during day of drama**

Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen stretched their lead in Rally Japan during a dramatic day's action on the country's most northerly island of Hokkaido today. The BP-Ford World Rally Team drivers returned to Obihiro with a 38.2sec advantage in their Focus RS World Rally Car after a marathon 14-hour stint behind the wheel.

Team-mates Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen, whose hopes of landing the FIA World Rally Championship drivers' title suffered a massive blow yesterday when they crashed out, enjoyed a welcome dose of good fortune today. Arch-rival Sébastien Loeb, who looked set to take Grönholm's championship lead, crashed out of second place this morning. It seems certain neither will take any points from this 14th round of the 16-rally championship.

After leaving Obihiro shortly after 05.00, drivers faced eight more speed tests to the north-east before two more passes over a short spectator-friendly test on the edge of the city – a total of 146.68km of competition. Heavy rain last night ensured the narrow but fast forest roads were treacherously muddy and Hirvonen opted for additional cuts in BFGoodrich's extra-soft tyres to maximise the grip on his Focus RS.

The 27-year-old Finn extended his 10.2sec overnight advantage by 0.4sec after powering to fastest time on the second special stage. The pressure was eased considerably when both Loeb and third-placed Jari-Matti Latvala crashed on the next test and Hirvonen reached the midpoint of the leg with a 50.5sec lead. He drove cautiously through the rougher afternoon stages to protect top spot.

"What a morning it was," he said. "I was happy to be fighting with Loeb but he made a mistake and when I saw him in a ditch I slowed down. When I then saw Jari-Matti off the road as well I slowed even further because I didn't want to follow them. The conditions were very wet but I had good grip and the tyres worked well. Every corner was so slippery that it was impossible to relax for a second.

"This afternoon was frustrating because there were deep ruts and stones on the roads. I drove at a pace at which I could control the rally from the front. This is a difficult event because the stages are so narrow, but the weather has made it even harder. The roads were like ice today. It's good to have a big lead but not so easy to concentrate when driving at less than 100 per cent. Tomorrow I will start behind Sordo and will monitor his split times in the stages and try to react if I need to step up the pace," he added.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson praised Hirvonen's performance. "He did a terrific job today and controlled the pace. It was a big shock when Loeb went off the road and it changed the entire situation as far as both the rally and the drivers' championship is concerned. The roads were rough this afternoon but Mikko preserved the car on the worst sections and it has run faultlessly," he said.

### News from our Rivals

Behind Hirvonen, Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) widened the gap over third-placed Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) on the opening two stages before the top of the leaderboard was turned upside down on the next test. First Loeb slid into a ditch after a pace note error before Latvala crashed into a tree. Both retired from the leg. On the next test Manfred Stohl (Citroen) dropped from fourth to sixth after a hydraulic problem left the Austrian without the use of his clutch. He lost two minutes and also received an additional 40sec penalty. The carnage left Luis Perez Companc (Ford) in fourth, despite going off the road briefly this morning, with Matthew Wilson (Ford) in fifth. Petter Solberg

(Subaru) restarted under SuperRally rules and won four of the 10 stages. Team-mate Xevi Pons retired from seventh after going off the road on the second stage.

### Tomorrow's route

The final leg is the shortest with 97.33km of competition. After leaving Obihiro at 05.40, competitors tackle two identical loops of three tests north of the city, split by a return to the Kita Aikoku service. The rally ends with a fifth and final pass over the super special stage on the edge of the city before the finish at 15.00.

### Leaderboard after Leg 2

<b>1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen</b>	<b>FIN</b>	<b>Ford Focus RS</b>	<b>2hr 26min 28.9sec</b>
2. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	2hr 27min 07.1sec
<b>3. H Solberg/C Menkerud</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Ford Focus RS</b>	<b>2hr 28min 20.6sec</b>
<b>4. L Perez Companc/J-M Volta</b>	<b>ARG</b>	<b>Ford Focus RS</b>	<b>2hr 31min 34.5sec</b>
<b>5. M Wilson/M Orr</b>	<b>GB</b>	<b>Ford Focus RS</b>	<b>2hr 31min 56.2sec</b>
6. M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	2hr 32min 28.6sec
<b>7. F Villagra/J-L Diaz</b>	<b>ARG</b>	<b>Ford Focus RS</b>	<b>2hr 33min 55.5sec</b>
8. K Taguchi/M Stacey	J	Mitsubishi Lancer	2hr 40min 19.3sec
9. G Pozzo/D Stillo	ARG	Mitsubishi Lancer	2hr 41min 16.0sec
10 T Kamada/N Kase	J	Subaru Impreza	2hr 42min 58.5sec

### Stage Times

Stage 11: 1. Loeb 2min 06.8sec; **2= Hirvonen, Solberg + 0.1**; 4. Latvala + 0.3; 5. H Solberg + 0.9; 6. Sordo + 2.0.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 1hr 02min 37.7sec**; 2. Loeb + 10.2; 3. Latvala + 13.9; 4. Sordo + 42.5; 5. H Solberg + 49.2; 6. Stohl + 1:34.9.

Stage 12: **1. Hirvonen 19min 28.3sec**; 2. Loeb + 0.4; 3. Sordo + 12.6; 4. Latvala + 13.9; 5. H Solberg + 23.8; 6. P Solberg + 32.8.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 1hr 22min 06.0sec**; 2. Loeb + 10.6; 3. Latvala + 27.8; 4. Sordo + 55.1; 5. H Solberg + 1:13.1; 6. Stohl + 2:13.1.

Stage 13: 1. Sordo 12min 31.3sec; 2. H Solberg + 3.9; **3. Hirvonen + 8.9**; 4. P Solberg + 11.1; 5. Stohl + 15.8; 6. Wilson + 28.9.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 1hr 34min 46.3sec**; 2. Sordo + 46.1; 3. H Solberg + 1:08.0; 4. Stohl + 2:19.9; 5. Perez Companc + 3:52.5; 6. Wilson + 4:02.5.

Stage 14: 1. P Solberg 12min 13.1sec; **2. Hirvonen + 6.5**; 3. Sordo + 10.9; 4. H Solberg + 16.0; 5. Perez Companc + 25.3; 6. Wilson + 32.4.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 1hr 47min 05.9sec**; 2. Sordo + 50.5; 3. H Solberg + 1:17.5; 4. Perez Companc + 4:11.3; 5. Wilson + 4:28.4; 6. Stohl + 5:17.0.

Stage 15: 1. P Solberg 2min 05.6sec; 2. H Solberg + 1.4; **3. Hirvonen + 1.5**; 4. Sordo + 2.0; 5. Wilson + 4.3; 6. Villagra + 4.6.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 1hr 49min 13.0sec**; 2. Sordo + 51.0; 3. H Solberg + 1:17.4; 4. Perez Companc + 4:15.7; 5. Wilson + 4:31.2; 6. Stohl + 5:20.5.

Stage 16: 1. P Solberg 19min 01.0sec; 2. Sordo + 12.2; **3. Hirvonen + 16.4**; 4. Stohl + 36.9; 5. H Solberg + 38.4; 6. Perez Companc + 48.2.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 2hr 08min 30.4sec**; 2. Sordo + 46.8; 3. H Solberg + 1:39.4; 4. Perez Companc + 4:47.5; 5. Wilson + 5:06.2; 6. Stohl + 5:41.0.

Stage 17: 1. Sordo 12min 17.5sec; 2. P Solberg + 0.8; **3. Hirvonen + 11.7**; 4. Perez Companc + 21.4; 5. H Solberg + 22.8; 6. Stohl + 23.6.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 2hr 20min 59.6sec**; 2. Sordo + 35.1; 3. H Solberg + 1:50.5; 4. Perez Companc + 4:57.2; 5. Wilson + 5:20.0; 6. Stohl + 5:52.9.

Stage 18: 1. P Solberg 2min 42.4sec; **2. Hirvonen + 0.1**; 3. H Solberg + 1.8; 4. Sordo + 4.7; 5. Stohl + 5.5; 6. Perez Companc + 6.6.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 2hr 23min 42.1sec**; 2. Sordo + 39.7; 3. H Solberg + 1:52.2; 4. Perez Companc + 5:03.7; 5. Wilson + 5:27.5; 6. Stohl + 5:58.3.

Stage 19: 1. Villagra 1min 21.4sec; 2. Sordo + 0.9; 3. P Solberg + 1.3; 4. Wilson + 1.7; 5. H Solberg + 1.9; **6. Hirvonen + 2.2**.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 2hr 25min 05.7sec**; 2. Sordo + 38.4; 3. H Solberg + 1:51.9; 4. Perez Companc + 5:04.1; 5. Wilson + 5:27.0; 6. Stohl + 5:59.0.

Stage 20: 1. Villagra 1min 22.0sec; 2= H Solberg, Sordo + 1.0; **4. Hirvonen + 1.2**; 5. Wilson + 1.5; 6. Stohl + 1.9.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 2hr 26min 28.9sec**; 2. Sordo + 38.2; 3. H Solberg + 1:51.7; 4. Perez Companc + 5:05.6; 5. Wilson + 5:27.3; 6. Stohl + 5:59.7.