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Title tension tightens as BP-Ford prepares for WRC finale

BP-Ford World Rally Team heads into the final three weekends of the FIA World Rally Championship season in head-to-head fights for both the manufacturers' and drivers' titles. Two rallies remain in that three-week period and the squad makes the short journey to Rally Ireland (15 - 18 November) in the knowledge that this series newcomer could prove the toughest challenge of the 16-round year.

The team goes into the event with a 34-point lead in the manufacturers' standings in its quest for a second consecutive title with the Ford Focus RS World Rally Car. A maximum 36 points are available, meaning that BP-Ford still requires three points to seal the crown. The drivers' battle is the most exciting for many years. BP-Ford's Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen lead by four points from Sébastien Loeb with a maximum 20 available from Ireland and the final round in Great Britain.

Despite being in a different country, Rally Ireland is the closest WRC round to the team's base in north-west England. But there is no question of local knowledge offering an advantage, as the roads in the north-west of the island will be new to both Grönholm and Rautiainen and team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen, winners of the previous round in Japan last month.

This cross-border event includes speed tests in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Essentially an asphalt rally, the tight and twisty roads are bumpy and narrow – often little more than the width of a car – with many surface changes. The more northerly special stages close to the border are used by farmers on a daily basis and will be dirty. With rain likely at this time of the year, they could quickly turn muddy and become treacherously slippery so a more gravel-based car set-up is likely to work better than a traditional smooth asphalt specification.

Grönholm won February's Galway Rally in Ireland as preparation for the WRC event but the dry and sunny weather that blessed that weekend could be far removed from the conditions next week. "That rally provided an insight into the type of roads used for rallying in Ireland," said the 39-year-old Finn. "However, until I make the recce next week I won't know how similar these stages are. I've been told the roads will be fast but unforgiving and difficult to read, so ensuring the pace notes are 100 per cent accurate will be vital during the recce.

"I'm really excited about the end of season. Fighting for world titles in both the drivers' and manufacturers' series is a great position to be in and to win both would be the most fantastic way to end my career. Of course, it's not that easy and things change quickly in this sport so nobody in the team is taking anything for granted. There are two rallies remaining and we have to be as strong and professional as we have been all season," he added.

Hirvonen also completed a practice in Ireland when he tackled the Cork '20' International Rally in September. "After what I saw there, I think this will be the most difficult rally of the season," said the 27-year-old Finn. "Nobody knows what the weather will do. It could be cold overnight so a combination of ice and narrow, bumpy roads would be extremely difficult.

"Victory in Japan was great for my confidence. I had a perfect drive over the whole weekend and I'm feeling good going into Ireland. I want to help the team win the manufacturers' title there and that would give me the opportunity to go to the final round in Wales with the opportunity to help Marcus in his fight for the drivers' title," he added.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid al Qassimi and Nicky Beech return to the BP-Ford squad for their fourth and final outing of the season in a Focus RS. "As with every WRC event I have done this year, Ireland will be another completely new challenge," said 35-year-old Al Qassimi. "As before, the objective will be to establish a pace and learn how to adapt to the particular challenges of this event.

"From what I understand of the stages in Ireland, they will be narrow, bumpy and with lots of surface changes. So in that respect, they will be quite similar to the roads in Lebanon on which I am competing this weekend. When I arrived in Lebanon it was wet, as it is likely to be in Ireland, and I realised very quickly just how slippery the roads can be in those circumstances, so that is already useful experience," he added.

Team News

* BP-Ford will have two tread patterns to choose from. BFGoodrich's g-Force Profiler is available in soft and medium compounds for dry asphalt while the Profiler H pattern is available in soft compound for wet roads. If the rain is heavy, engineers will carve additional cuts into the H pattern. The grooves can be longitudinal to combat aquaplaning or lateral for extra braking and traction.

* The team today completes a three-day asphalt test in the Isle of Man in preparation for the rally. Grönholm drove for two days with Hirvonen ending the session today. In the week following Rally Ireland the team has a four-day gravel test scheduled in northern England. Grönholm will again open the work with Hirvonen bringing the test to a conclusion.

Rally Route

The rally is based in the small town of Sligo, in the north-west of the Republic of Ireland, which also hosts the single service park. Even for those drivers who competed in the candidate event here last year, there will be little advantage as more than two-thirds of the route is new and only one stage is unchanged. The rally begins on Thursday evening with a super special stage at Stormont, Northern Ireland's Parliament buildings in Belfast. The opening day is the longest and is based entirely in the Republic, taking in fast moorland and mountain roads east of Sligo. The second leg's stages cover narrow farm roads in the Fermanagh lakelands, across the border in Northern Ireland. The final day includes both countries, ending with a picture postcard test on the coast at Mullaghmore, which will be covered live on television, before the afternoon finish in Sligo. Drivers face 20 stages covering 342.34km in a total route of 1196.25km. Of the 14 stage locations, six are in Northern Ireland and eight in the Republic.