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Hirvonen climbs to second as Monte Carlo Rally heads for home

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen ended the penultimate day of Rallye Monte Carlo in second place following another strong performance in the French mountains. The Finns' consistent pace enabled them to climb from third this morning in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car and they will start tomorrow's tricky final leg in the foothills of the Alps almost a minute ahead of their closest rivals.

Team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila were less fortunate in the second BP Ford Abu Dhabi-entered Focus RS. They were in a points-scoring ninth position, despite hydraulic difficulties this morning, before hitting a stone and breaking their car's suspension. They retired and hope to restart tomorrow's final leg under SuperRally rules.

The third day of this opening round of the FIA World Rally Championship was the longest of the event. It returned to the Ardèche mountains near the rally base of Valence, although the competition was further north than yesterday's action. After an early start, drivers tackled two identical loops of three speed tests covering 132.78km. Ice was a constant threat on the opening special stage in the half-light this morning, but temperatures quickly rose under clear skies and the huge crowds that flocked into the mountains enjoyed glorious winter sunshine.

Hirvonen kept the pressure on second-placed Dani Sordo throughout the morning and was rewarded when Sordo retired, allowing the 27-year-old Focus RS driver to climb from third to second. He maintained a consistent pace this afternoon to end the day 52.0sec ahead of Chris Atkinson in third.

"When I woke up this morning I was hoping that I could take second, but I didn't think it would happen like that," said Hirvonen. "Dani's retirement really helped me and I want to keep this position now because the two extra points for second would be good. I hoped to be closer to Loeb's pace but that wasn't possible here. I was happy with Pirelli's tyres, they worked well in the cold, dry conditions.

"There are still four more stages to come tomorrow so I will try to keep the car on the road and take no risks because I have a good lead over Atkinson in third. I don't have huge experience of tomorrow's stages and I can expect anything on the Col de Turini. There is usually snow, ice or fog at the top and it is dry then black ice will be a concern, so it will be a tricky day," he added.

Team-mates Latvala and Anttila suffered a hydraulic problem on the opening test and had to drive the rest of the loop using the manual gearchange system and without the normal differential performance. Despite losing about 50sec, Latvala remained ninth but the 22-year-old Finn hit a stone on the afternoon's opening stage. The impact broke the front left track control arm and he had to sit out the rest of the day.

"I made some small changes to the differential set-up at the midday service and the stage started well," explained Latvala. "I felt confident with the car and my split times were good. About halfway through on a narrow road I came to a left hand corner and tried to follow the line of the cars ahead. I must have taken a slightly tighter line because I hit a concrete stone which broke the suspension. I drove on for another 500m until I found somewhere wide enough to stop."

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr restarted under SuperRally rules in 26th position after breaking the suspension on their Focus RS last night. They climbed to 24th,

despite spinning on the final stage this morning and dropping about 20sec. "I've been trying to rebuild my confidence after last night and that was hard this morning because the first stage was frosty and foggy in places," said Al Qassimi. "This afternoon I had difficulties with my brakes and had to bleed them in between the stages. But I'm still here and learning all the time."

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson was full of praise for Hirvonen. "He drove superbly to keep the pressure on Sordo this morning and kept out of trouble to move into second. I'm disappointed that Jari-Matti dropped out of the manufacturers' points but hopefully he can challenge again tomorrow. It will be a difficult day with some classic stages to come," said Wilson.

News from our rivals

Overnight leader Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) extended his advantage by winning four of the six stages and he journeyed to Monaco tonight with a 2min 10.6sec lead. The French team's hopes of a one-two finish ended when team-mate Dani Sordo retired with engine problems on the final stage of the morning loop. Chris Atkinson (Subaru) climbed to third, winning the penultimate test and stretching his advantage over François Duval (Ford) to 20.1sec. Petter Solberg (Subaru) is fifth with Italian Gigi Galli (Ford) moving into the top six. It was a good day for championship debutants Suzuki with Per-Gunnar Andersson moving into the drivers' points in eighth and Toni Gardemeister in 10th, despite a clutch problem this morning.

Tomorrow's route

After a free transit section to Monaco this evening, the final day is based in the mountains of the Alpes-Maritimes, high above the Principality. After a 07.50 start, drivers face four tests, including two passes over the famous Col de Turini, before a short service break at Gilette. They then return to Monaco for a super special stage around the harbour area of the Grand Prix circuit. The finish is at the palace in Monaco in late afternoon after 66.65km of competition.

Leaderboard after Day 3

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	2hr 50min 38.8sec
2. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 52min 49.4sec
3. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	2hr 53min 41.4sec
4. F Duval/E Chevailler	B	Ford Focus RS	2hr 54min 01.5sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	2hr 54min 50.6sec
6. G Galli/G Bernacchini	I	Ford Focus RS	2hr 58min 18.5sec
7. J-M Cuoq/P Janvier	F	Peugeot 307	2hr 58min 58.5sec
8. P-G Andersson/J Andersson	S	Suzuki SX4	3hr 00min 10.6sec
9. H Solberg/C Menkerud	N	Ford Focus RS	3hr 01min 55.8sec
10 T Gardemeister/T Tuominen	FIN	Suzuki SX4	3hr 02min 02.2sec

Stage Times

Stage 9: 1. Sordo 11min 18.1sec; 2. Loeb + 2.0; 3. Atkinson + 6.3; **4. Hirvonen + 14.5**; 5. Andersson + 12.5; 6. P Solberg + 15.8; **13. Latvala + 52.1**; **15. Al Qassimi + 1:05.4**.
Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 48min 05.0sec; 2. Sordo + 54.6; **3. Hirvonen + 1:27.6**; 4. Atkinson + 2:32.9; 5. Duval + 3:00.5; 6. P Solberg + 3:23.4; **11. Latvala + 7:45.9**; **26. Al Qassimi + 22:49.4**.

Stage 10: 1. Loeb 12min 39.0sec; 2. Sordo + 1.2; 3. Duval + 6.0; **4. Hirvonen + 7.8**; 5. P Solberg + 9.3; 6. Atkinson + 10.7; **12. Latvala + 37.1**; **16. Al Qassimi + 1:15.4**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 00min 44.0sec; 2. Sordo + 55.8; **3. Hirvonen + 1.35 4**; 4. Atkinson + 2:43.6; 5. Duval + 3:06.5; 6. P Solberg + 3:32.7; **10. Latvala + 8:23.0; 25. Al Qassimi + 24:04.8.**

Stage 11: 1. Loeb 12min 59.8sec; 2. Duval + 8.9; **3. Hirvonen + 18.1**; 4. P Solberg + 21.1; 5. Atkinson + 21.7; 6. Galli + 24.1; **11. Latvala + 52.9; 16. Al Qassimi + 1:33.8.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 13min 43.8sec; **2. Hirvonen + 1.53 5**; 3. Atkinson + 3:05.3; 4. Duval + 3:15.4; 5. P Solberg + 3:53.9; 6. Galli + 6:53.5; **9. Latvala + 9:15.9; 24. Al Qassimi + 25:38.6.**

Stage 12: 1. Loeb 11min 12.0sec; 2. Atkinson + 2.6; 3. Duval + 6.1; **4. Hirvonen + 6.6**; 4. P Solberg + 7.3; 6. Galli + 9.5; **?? Al Qassimi + 1:10.2.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 24min 55.8sec; **2. Hirvonen + 2.00 1**; 3. Atkinson + 3:07.9; 4. Duval + 3:21.5; 5. P Solberg + 4:01.2; 6. Galli + 7:03.0; **24. Al Qassimi + 26:48.8.**

Stage 13: 1. Atkinson 12min 23.9sec; 2. Duval + 7.5; 3. Loeb + 10.7; 4. P Solberg + 11.9; **5. Hirvonen + 12.7**; 6. Gardemeister + 27.1; **14. Al Qassimi + 1:33.0.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 37min 30.4sec; **2. Hirvonen + 2.02 1**; 3. Atkinson + 2:57.2; 4. Duval + 3:18.3; 5. P Solberg + 4:02.4; 6. Galli + 7:20.7; **24. Al Qassimi + 28:11.1.**

Stage 14: 1. Loeb 13min 08.4sec; 2. Duval + 4.4; 3. Atkinson + 5.4; **4. Hirvonen + 8.5**; 5. P Solberg + 9.4; 6. Galli + 19.0; **12. Al Qassimi + 1:24.3.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 50min 38.8sec; **2. Hirvonen + 2.10 6**; 3. Atkinson + 3:02.6; 4. Duval + 3:22.7; 5. P Solberg + 4:11.8; 6. Galli + 7:39.7; **23. Al Qassimi + 29:35.4.**