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Latvala retains lead as five Fords fill top six in Swedish Rally

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team continued to dominate the Swedish Rally today to maintain first and second positions with one day of this second round of the FIA World Rally Championship remaining. Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila retained the lead in their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car, 49.8sec ahead of teammates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen. Focus RS cars fill five of the top six positions.

If yesterday's opening leg displayed few of the hallmarks of a traditional Swedish Rally in the midst of a Scandinavian winter, then today resembled the championship's only pure-winter event even less. Temperatures climbed to an unseasonably mild 5° in the Värmland region of central Sweden, and the speed tests close to the town of Hagfors were pure gravel during this afternoon's second pass, rather than the traditional ice and snow.

After heading north from the rally base in Karlstad this morning, drivers were scheduled to tackle two identical loops of three special stages, covering 120.88km. However, organisers cancelled the second pass over the opening 14.89km test this afternoon as the gravel roads were in such poor condition after the studded tyres ripped into the surface during the first run.

Latvala, chasing his maiden world rally victory on only his second event with the team, extended his 48.2sec lead over Hirvonen to 62.1sec during the first two tests. Hirvonen narrowed the gap to 53.9sec at the midpoint and then won the final stage to leave the pair in virtually the same situation tonight as when they began the day's competition.

"It was difficult being first on the road through the opening stage because there was a lot of slush for the first 3km and we did a lot of moving from snowbank to snowbank," said Latvala. "Then it changed to gravel and while the grip was great, the gravel wasn't good for the tyre studs. Malcolm Wilson (team director) told me this morning to be sensible. My heart was beating hard on the way to the first stage but I feel relaxed now, although I'm relieved the day is over.

"I drove hard but eased off in the difficult sections. I watched Mikko's split times and matched my pace accordingly. The conditions were incredible, with so much slush and water on the ground and I've never driven on studded winter tyres when there is no ice. It's getting exciting, but I don't want to get too excited yet. I tried to stay calm and focus on my concentration and I need to keep a cool head tomorrow when I expect the conditions to be similar," added the 22-year-old Finn.

Hirvonen's initial plan was to close on Latvala. However, as the day progressed the 27-year-old Finn's thoughts turned more towards the enticing prospect of

eight points in the drivers' championship for second place, especially with series leader Sébastien Loeb having retired. He took no risks and holds a comfortable 46.1sec advantage over third-placed Gigi Galli.

"My plan was to come to Sweden and win, but Jari-Matti has been more than fast and deserves to lead," he said. "I wanted to catch him but I didn't have a good feeling on the first two stages. I found a better rhythm as the day went on. I'm a little disappointed not to lead, but I'm happy with second. The gap is big on both sides of me so I'll drive carefully tomorrow to save my tyres. It won't be flat out. "There was a huge amount of mud and water on the stages. Conditions were bad and temperatures are so high that it was difficult to use stages twice because the surface wasn't hard enough," he added.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr restarted in 12th in a third team Focus RS, but endured a tough day. This morning they slid into a ditch on the first stage losing more than eight minutes. Then they had to stop in the next test to clear snow from the radiator and allow the engine temperature to cool after swiping a snowbank, dropping another two minutes. Another visit to a ditch on the first stage this afternoon cost almost three minutes and they now lie 33rd.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson reflected on another satisfying day. "It's been a dream day for both Jari-Matti and Mikko, with some text book driving. They appreciated what they had to do and stayed out of trouble. To see five Ford Focus cars in the top six is an incredible situation and I hope tomorrow will be just as successful," he said.

News from our Rivals

Behind the BP Ford Abu Dhabi cars, Italian Gigi Galli (Ford) held third on only his second rally with the Stobart team. He moved into a podium place after team-mate Henning Solberg punctured on the opening stage and dropped 20sec. The Norwegian then retired when he damaged the front of his car after hitting a barrier. Petter Solberg (Subaru) is fourth, despite finding his car hard to drive after a shock absorber change. Stobart's Matthew Wilson (Ford) lies fifth while Norway's Andreas Mikkelsen rounds off Ford's domination in sixth. Dani Sordo (Citroen) climbed to seventh after winning two stages while Toni Gardemeister (Suzuki) is eighth, despite losing 3min 30sec after going off the road this morning. Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) restarted under SuperRally rules after retiring yesterday. He won two stages before retiring on a liaison section this afternoon with engine problems.

Tomorrow's Route

The final day is also based around Hagfors. After leaving Karlstad at 06.20, drivers face two identical loops of three stages to the south and east of Hagfors covering 97.22km, with another remote service zone in the town between the laps. They return to Karlstad for the finish ceremony at 15.08.

Leaderboard after Day 2

1. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 03min 53.7sec
2. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 04min 43.5sec
3. G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	2hr 05min 29.6sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	2hr 06min 34.6sec
5. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	2hr 08min 31.3sec
6. A Mikkelsen/O Floene	NOR	Ford Focus RS	2hr 08min 41.8sec
7. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	2hr 10min 45.6sec
8. T Gardemeister/T Tuominen	FIN	Suzuki SX4	2hr 12min 43.0sec
9. J Hanninen/M Markkula	FIN	Mitsubishi Lancer	2hr 12min 46.4sec
10 J Ketomaa/M Teiskonen	FIN	Subaru Impreza	2hr 13min 54.5sec

Stage Times

Stage 9: 1. Loeb 9min 18.1sec; 2. Sordo + 0.5; 3. Mikkelsen + 5.3; 4. Latvala + 6.9; 5. Hirvonen + 11.8; 6. Gardemeister + 13.2; 55. Al Qassimi + 9:10.1.

Overall: 1. Latvala 1hr 12min 58.3sec; 2. Hirvonen + 53.1; 3. Galli + 1:11.0; 4. H Solberg + 1:19.0; 5. P Solberg + 1:59.2; 6. Wilson + 3:11.3; 33. Al Qassimi + 14:42.7.

Stage 10: 1. Sordo 11min 45.8sec; 2. Latvala, H Solberg + 1.6; 4. Loeb + 4.6; 5. Mikkelsen + 6.2; 6. Galli + 6.3; 7. Hirvonen + 10.6; 48. Al Qassimi + 2:51.1.

Overall: 1. Latvala 1hr 24min 45.7sec; 2. Hirvonen + 1:02.1; 3. Galli + 1:15.7; 4. H Solberg + 1:19.0; 5. P Solberg + 2:19.7; 6. Wilson + 3:34.6; 34. Al Qassimi + 17:32.2.

Stage 11: 1. Loeb 13min 49.1sec; 2. Hirvonen + 1.0; 3. Latvala + 9.2; 4. Sordo + 10.0; 5. Atkinson + 13.5; 6. Galli + 15.8; 21. Al Qassimi + 1:24.4.

Overall: 1. Latvala 1hr 38min 44.0sec; 2. Hirvonen + 53.9; 3. Galli + 1:22.3; 4. P Solberg + 2:34.0; 5. Wilson + 3:57.7; 6. Mikkelsen + 4:23.7; 31. Al Qassimi + 18:47.4.

Stage 12: Cancelled

Stage 13: 1. Sordo 11min 30.1sec; 2. Latvala + 1.7; 3. Hirvonen + 3.0; 4. P Solberg + 5.0; 5. Galli + 8.1; 6. Mikkelsen + 9.6; 47. Al Qassimi + 3:29.7.

Overall: 1. Latvala 1hr 50min 15.8sec; 2. Hirvonen + 55.2; 3. Galli + 1:28.7; 4. P Solberg + 2:37.3; 5. Wilson + 4:15.9; 6. Mikkelsen + 4:31.6; 36. Al Qassimi + 22:15.4.

Stage 14: 1. Hirvonen 13min 32.5sec; 2. Latvala + 5.4; 3. Atkinson + 5.6; 4. Sordo + 6.0; 5. P Solberg + 9.0; 6. Galli + 12.6; 16. Al Qassimi + 1:14.5.

Overall: 1. Latvala 2hr 03min 53.7sec; 2. Hirvonen + 49.8; 3. Galli + 1:35.9; 4. P Solberg + 2:40.9; 5. Wilson + 4:37.6; 6. Mikkelsen + 4:48.6; 33. Al Qassimi + 23:24.5.