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Championship leader Ford aims to cut loose on Mexican gravel

After establishing a strong early season lead in the FIA World Rally Championship on asphalt and snow, BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team journeys to North America next week for the first of seven consecutive gravel events. Loose surface roads are the dominant terrain in the series, hosting 10 of the 15 rounds, and so Rally Mexico (28 February - 2 March) will offer the best guideline to date for the season ahead.

The Ford Focus RS World Rally Car claimed a clean sweep of the podium positions in Sweden earlier this month with BP Ford Abu Dhabi on the top two steps. Combined with second place on the season-opener in Monte Carlo in January, the reigning world manufacturers' champion travels to this third round with a 10-point lead. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen are six points clear in the drivers' table with Sweden winners Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila tied in second.

Ford is a major sponsor of the rally, which is based in León in the centre of the country. It is the first of three consecutive rounds outside Europe and is also the highest in the championship. Most speed tests are over 2000m and the first leg climbs to more than 2700m on hillsides awash with cacti and water crossings. The altitude takes its toll on cars as the thinner air means engines 'run out of breath' and can lose up to 30 per cent of their usual power.

The special stages are fast and flowing and average speeds last year topped 96kph. They are mostly hard-packed gravel, although some are sandier, and organisers worked closely with local authorities to build stages for the rally that also opened up new link roads for isolated villages.

Hirvonen, whose best finish in his three previous starts was third last year, will be first in the start order on the opening day courtesy of being championship leader for the first time in his career.

"First on the road isn't the best place to be in Mexico because there will be loose gravel and stones on the road surface," said the 27-year-old Finn. "It's better to be further down the order where the roads will be cleaner but I don't mind putting up with that if it means I lead the championship. I really don't want to start first on Saturday or Sunday though, and it will be interesting to see if tactics come into play at the end of the first day as drivers try to obtain a better start position for the rest of the weekend.

"Technically the roads are a mix. About 50 per cent is quite straightforward and the rest is more difficult. There are also plenty of stones on the edge of the road. In the past, with puncture-resistant mousse in the tyres, that wouldn't have been a problem but now it's something I have to think about more carefully. The altitude is the most difficult aspect because the higher the stages, the less power there is and sometimes when you need the power it isn't there. I will attack as hard as I can from the start. We had a good test last week and I was pleased with Pirelli's gravel tyre. I'm not concerned about punctures or tyre wear," added Hirvonen.

Latvala became the youngest driver in history to win a WRC round in Sweden last month on only his second outing with the BP Ford Abu Dhabi team. The 22-year-

old Finn acknowledges that victory imposed demands on him that he had not experienced before. "It was a surprise because I didn't expect so much media interest and I was very busy handling interviews for a few days after the rally," he said.

"I don't have as much experience in Mexico compared to some other rounds and I need to be a bit calmer than in Sweden. Another win isn't a realistic aim and I would be happy with a top three position. I was very satisfied with last week's test. Pirelli's tyres felt strong. I had a couple of impacts with stones but no punctures so I have no concerns.

Latvala was seventh last year, his best result from just two starts, and has learned to be cautious of the water crossings. "In the recce the roads are in good condition but it's surprising how many big impacts the cars can take during the rally itself. Where the water flows down from the mountains and crosses the roads, the concrete crossings can be deep and after a fast section the car can take quite a hard impact there," he explained.

Team news

* The team prepared for the rally with a four-day test at Chateau Lastours in France following the Swedish Rally. It was the first opportunity for both Hirvonen and Latvala to test Pirelli's new gravel tyre. Each drove for two days, concentrating on tyre work and completing about 400km each with no punctures. They also tested some new development parts for the Focus RS.

* As part of the sport's new regulations, BP Ford Abu Dhabi will have just one tyre pattern from new partner, Pirelli. The Scorpion gravel tyre, which will make its competitive debut in Mexico, will be available in hard compound only. Because anti-deflation mousse is also outlawed this year, the Scorpion includes reinforced sidewalls to offer increased protection against punctures. Teams are not allowed to hand-carve additional cuts into the rubber and each car can carry two spares.

* Four other Focus RS cars will start the rally. Gigi Galli / Giovanni Bernacchini and Matthew Wilson / Scott Martin will be nominated for points by the Stobart VK M-Sport team. The Munchi's Ford World Rally Team will make its season debut with Henning Solberg / Cato Menkerud and Federico Villagra / Jorge Pérez Companc nominated to score. Rally Mexico is not part of the programme for Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi / Michael Orr.

Rally route

Mexico was a late inclusion in the calendar following the withdrawal of Rally Australia. The route is virtually identical to 2007 with just a few small variations to some stages. It has the shortest route ever for a WRC event, covering just 830.83km with a remarkable 43 per cent of that being competitive. It is based in León, 400km north of Mexico City, with stages to the north and east. It is the highest round in the series, with the opening day's Ortega test climbing through cacti-filled mountains to a breathtaking 2737m. It begins on Thursday evening with a spectacular ceremonial start in Guanajuato, which last year was packed with more than 60,000 fans. The town is a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site, famed for its beauty and underground road network. The opening two days comprise two identical loops of three stages before two passes over a super

special stage at León's race circuit. The track also hosts a double run on Sunday morning to bring the rally to a close. Drivers tackle 20 stages covering 353.75km.

RALLY MEXICO

ROUND 3 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

28 February - 2 March 2008

Thursday 28 February: Ceremonial start

Start	Guanajuato	20.00
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Friday 29 February: Day 1 León - León

Start	León	08.00	
SS1	Alfaro 1	22.96km	08.28
SS2	Ortega 1	23.83km	09.51
SS3	El Cubilete 1	18.87km	10.39
Serv A	León Poliforum (30 mins)		12.04
SS4	Alfaro 2	22.96km	13.02
SS5	Ortega 2	23.83km	14.25
SS6	El Cubilete 2	18.87km	15.13
SS7	Super Special 1	2.21km	16.33
SS8	Super Special 2	2.21km	16.38
Serv B	León Poliforum (45 mins)		17.08
Finish	León		17.53
Total		135.74km	

Saturday 1 March: Day 2 León - León

Serv C	León Poliforum (15 mins)		07.30
SS9	Ibarrilla 1	29.90km	08.24
SS10	Duarte 1	23.27km	09.47
SS11	Derramadero 1	23.28km	10.38
Serv D	León Poliforum (30 mins)		12.03
SS12	Ibarrilla 2	29.90km	13.12
SS13	Duarte 2	23.27km	14.35
SS14	Derramadero 2	23.28km	15.26
SS15	Super Special 3	2.21km	16.41
SS16	Super Special 4	2.21km	16.46
Serv E	León Poliforum (45 mins)		17.16
Finish	León		18.01
Total		157.32km	

Sunday 2 March: Day 3 León - León

Serv F	León Poliforum (15 mins)		07.45
SS17	León	16.09km	08.28
SS18	Guanajuatito	22.30km	08.56
SS19	Comanjilla	17.88km	10.19
SS20	Super Special 5	4.42km	11.34
Serv G	León Poliforum (10 mins)		12.07
Finish	León		13.00
Total		60.69km	
Rally total		353.75km	