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Ford stretches world championship lead in Rally Mexico

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team increased its advantage at the head of the FIA World Rally Championship after a strong double points haul in Mexico today. The team, chasing its third consecutive manufacturers' world title, is 12 points clear with the Focus RS World Rally Car after Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila finished third in Rally Mexico and team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen claimed fourth.

Hirvonen retains the lead in the drivers' standings after this third round of the 15-rally series, the 27-year-old Finn ahead by one point. Latvala lies third, five points behind his team-mate.

This opening gravel event of the season proved a tough challenge and few escaped problems over the three days and 331.45km of competition in the mountains of central Mexico, near León. The high altitude speed tests, which climbed to more than 2700m, meant engines lost about 25 percent of their normal power in the thinner air while the rocky tracks proved a constant hazard for the unwary.

Latvala, who led after Friday's opening action, started today's final day in third after a turbo pipe problem yesterday afternoon. With no pressure from behind and no chance of making progress up the leaderboard, the 22-year-old Finn paced himself through the final three special stages (the second test was cancelled for safety reasons due to the volume of spectators), but was still fastest on the opening stage to secure a podium finish.

"It's an important result for me and it's a good result for the team and our championship challenge," he said. "I achieved my goal of being on the podium and it's just a shame we had a problem yesterday when fighting for the lead. But if I think about things closely, it has been a good weekend and I don't have any complaints. The best aspect was being able to challenge Loeb and match his times and I hope I can get just as close to him in the future because I had good speed this weekend."

Hirvonen began the morning in fifth, after losing time through punctures on Friday and Saturday combined with being first in the start order and sweeping the roads clean of loose stones on the opening day. He was within striking distance of fourth and fastest time on the penultimate test moved him just ahead of Henning Solberg. He consolidated fourth on the final stage when the Norwegian struck trouble.

"I tried to catch Henning but when stage 18 was cancelled, I decided I didn't have enough kilometres left in which to do it," said Hirvonen. "I was lucky he had a problem and I'm glad to finish fourth and take good points after a difficult weekend. It just wasn't my rally unfortunately. Jari-Matti and Loeb were very fast and I couldn't reach their pace but I'll have to find that speed or say goodbye to the championship. I was unlucky with punctures but fourth is

OK in the circumstances and hopefully this is the worst rally I'll have this year. Unfortunately I will be first on the road again on the next round in Argentina, but it feels good to be still leading the championship.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson said: "After what we encountered, we've come away with a great result which increases our lead in the championship. And for Mikko to still lead the drivers' standings after his problems is more than we thought we would achieve on Friday night. I'm pleased we showed the speed to lead the rally and that's promising looking forward to another high altitude event in Argentina later this month."

Ford of Europe motorsport director Mark Deans was equally happy. "This was the first gravel rally of the season and for the Focus RS WRC to prove its speed on what is the dominant surface of the year bodes well. Five Focus cars finished in the top seven and for BP Ford Abu Dhabi to maintain its lead in both championships after three rounds represents an excellent opening sector of the year," he said.

News from our rivals

Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) paced himself through the final stages to claim his third consecutive Rally Mexico victory. The Frenchman finished 66.1sec ahead of Chris Atkinson (Subaru), who scored his best ever result, despite feeling unwell and only three hours' sleep. Behind the BP Ford Abu Dhabi cars, Henning Solberg (Ford) took fifth, the Munchi's driver losing fourth place after front right punctures on the final two tests. Stobart driver Matthew Wilson (Ford) rounded off the top six while Munchi's Federico Villagra (Ford) equalled his career best result in seventh. Petter Solberg (Subaru) claimed the final manufacturers' point in 12th, despite a front right puncture on the penultimate stage and a spin on the final test.

Next round

The championship remains in the Americas for round four when Villa Carlos Paz hosts the all-gravel Rally Argentina on 27 - 30 March.

Final positions

1.	S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	3hr 33min 29.9sec
2.	C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	3hr 34min 36.0sec
3.	J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 35min 09.6sec
4.	M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 37min 08.6sec
5.	H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	3hr 38min 27.8sec
6.	M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	3hr 39min 58.8sec
7.	F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	3hr 52min 32.9sec
8.	R Trivino/C Salom	MEX	Peugeot 206	3hr 54min 47.2sec*
9.	S Ogier/J Ingrassia	FRA	Citroen C2	3hr 58min 54.8sec
10	J Mölder/F Miclotte	EST	Suzuki Swift	4hr 00min 26.7sec

*subject to the result of an appeal

Drivers

1. M Hirvonen	21pts
2. S Loeb	20pts
3. J-M Latvala	16pts
4. C Atkinson	14pts
5. G Galli	9pts
6. P Solberg	9pts

Manufacturers

1. BP Ford Abu Dhabi	37pts
2. Citroen Total	25pts
3. Subaru	25pts
4. Stobart VK M-Sport	19pts
5. Munchi's Ford	6pts
6. Suzuki	5pts

Stage Times

Stage 17: **1. Latvala 10min 43.3sec**; 2. P Solberg + 0.2; **3. Hirvonen + 2.9**;
4. Sordo + 3.4; 5. H Solberg + 9.6; 6. Loeb + 10.5.

Overall: 1. Loeb 3hr 19min 33.6sec; 2. Atkinson + 1:04.8; **3. Latvala + 1:55.9**;
4. H Solberg + 3:50.7; **5. Hirvonen + 3:59.9**; 6. Wilson + 6:23.6.

Stage 18: Cancelled

Stage 19: **1. Hirvonen 10min 12.7sec**; **2. Latvala + 1.0**; 3. Sordo + 1.5; 4. H
Solberg + 11.7; 5. Loeb + 19.2; 6. Wilson + 23.2.

Overall: 1. Loeb 3hr 30min 05.6sec; 2. Atkinson + 1:09.7; **3. Latvala + 1:37.7**;
4. Hirvonen + 3:40.7; 5. H Solberg + 3:43.2; 6. Wilson + 6:27.6.

Stage 20: 1. Sordo 3min 19.3sec; 2. Atkinson + 1.5; **3= Hirvonen, Villagra +**
3.1; 5. Loeb + 5.1; 6. Wilson + 6.4; **7. Latvala + 7.1**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 3hr 33min 29.9sec; 2. Atkinson + 1:06.1; **3. Latvala + 1:39.7**;
4. Hirvonen + 3:38.7; 5. H Solberg + 4:57.9; 6. Wilson + 6:28.9.