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Ford hunts for highs among the lowlands of Jordan's Dead Sea

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team can expect to experience a mix of highs and lows during the course of the 15-round FIA World Rally Championship season – both literally and metaphorically. After tackling the two highest rounds in the championship in Mexico and Argentina last month, the leaders of the manufacturers' championship will aspire to a high in the lowlands of Jordan next week when the fifth round of the series takes the team to the lowest point on earth at the Dead Sea.

Rally Jordan (24 - 27 April) is the first WRC round in an Arab country since 1976 and represents a step into the unknown for Ford's Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen and team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila. Neither pairing has visited Jordan before, so the characteristics of the Middle East roads and the vagaries of the conditions will offer a steep learning curve for the Finnish quartet as they strive to extend Ford's three-point series lead in their Focus RS World Rally Cars.

The rally is based on the shores of the Dead Sea, 420 metres below sea level, and the location will provide a boost to the Focus RS' engine performance. In contrast to Mexico and Argentina where low air pressure at altitude meant less oxygen was available to burn fuel in the engine, resulting in less power, the opposite will be true in Jordan.

The speed tests will be held in west and north of the country and Government support has enabled organisers to build several new gravel roads specifically for the rally. With rain extremely unlikely, conditions will be dusty and it promises to be gruelling for drivers with temperatures forecast to be well in excess of 30°C initially, before cooling slightly as the rally progresses.

Twenty-seven-year-old Hirvonen, who is second in the drivers' championship, is relishing the prospect of attacking Jordan's roads. "I've never been there but I've spoken to some drivers who have and seen photographs from our team, who visited the candidate rally last year," he said. "The roads look smooth and it seems as though the organisers have done a good job in preparing them. They look fast and flowing, like Finland but without the jumps, so if that's the case they should be good for me.

"Sunday's final leg is the longest of the rally, which is quite different to most events. If a driver has large time gaps in front or behind then there will be more kilometres than usual in which to keep an eye on things. But if the time gaps are just 20 or 30 seconds, there could still be a lot to fight for on the final day. I was happier with my speed on the first morning during the last round in Argentina. The poor conditions probably helped me initially, but when they improved I still took some time from Sébastien Loeb and so it was definitely an improvement," added Hirvonen.

Latvala is unconcerned about tackling a new rally. "I think it's good because everyone is in the same position and knowledge of the roads isn't an issue," he said. "We have to be careful when making pace notes during the recce so we're confident with them for the rally. The recce vehicle is fitted with an in-car camera to film the stages so I can watch them before the start. It helps me to remember the stages because it's like a third recce pass over the roads, but it does look different on video than in reality.

"Last year there were three new rallies in the championship and I enjoyed the challenge of those so I'm looking forward to Jordan. I understand the roads are hard and fast so they should suit me. Although it's my first time in Jordan, car set-up isn't a concern. Now I have a set-up that feels good, I use that as a base for most rallies and don't need to make big changes, just a little fine tuning in places," he added.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr will drive a third team Focus RS on their first outing since February's Swedish Rally, and Al Qassimi's first gravel event since Rally Finland in August. His background is in the FIA Middle East Rally Championship and he won the Jordan Rally last year when it was a candidate WRC round. He is the only leading driver with previous competitive experience of these roads.

"I've competed here six or seven times but the desert stages on which we used to drive have been replaced by new roads," said 36-year-old Al Qassimi. "This year about 40 per cent of the stages are different from 2007. The roads are so smooth it's like driving on asphalt - only the brown colour tells you they are not. I won last year by only pushing at 50 per cent and that's the pace at which I will start this year. If I feel good after the first couple of stages, then I will try to push harder. This is my first rally on Pirelli's new gravel tyre so I will need some time to learn about it."

Team news

* As part of the sport's new regulations, BP Ford Abu Dhabi will have just one tyre pattern from Pirelli. The Scorpion gravel tyre 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.

* Five other Focus RS cars will start the rally. Gigi Galli / Giovanni Bernacchini and Henning Solberg / Cato Menkerud will be nominated for points by the Stobart VK M-Sport team. Matthew Wilson / Scott Martin will drive a third Stobart car. Munchi's Ford World Rally Team has nominated Federico Villagra / Jorge Pérez Companc and Luis Pérez Companc / José María Volta to score.

* BP Ford Abu Dhabi held a four-day test on gravel in northern Spain this week. Hirvonen drove for the first two days with Latvala taking over for the final two days of the test, which finished yesterday. The two drivers covered 680km, with the

first three days in dry conditions before heavy rain on the last day. The test concentrated on development work with engine and suspension parts.

Rally route

The rally is based at the Dead Sea, 50km south-west of Amman and at 427m below sea level, the lowest point on earth. The stages will run through historical and biblical sites around the Jordan Valley and Rumman forests, and all except one are fully or partially below sea level. World famous areas including the Baptism site of Jesus and Mount Nebo, where Moses looked over the Promised Land, will be part of the rally route. Each day comprises two identical loops of tests with some roads being used four times over two separate legs. The final leg is the longest and contains a sting in the tail with two passes over the twisty 41.45km Jordan River stage which runs through 'no man's land' on the Jordan - Palestine border. Drivers tackle 22 stages covering 359.26km in a route of 983.44km.