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Clever tactics put Ford's Finns into perfect position in Jordan

Measured performances in the furnace of the Dead Sea valley placed BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team in the ideal position following the opening day of the Jordan Rally. Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila lie third on this fifth round of the FIA World Rally Championship, with team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen fourth after an enthralling day's competition on the WRC's first visit to an Arab country since 1976. Both pairings are driving Ford Focus RS World Rally Cars.

The early starters are disadvantaged by slippery loose stones on top of the hard-packed gravel roads south-west of the capital city of Amman. By ending the first leg of this three-day rally in third and fourth, just a few seconds behind the leading pair, BP Ford Abu Dhabi's duo will inherit those positions in the start order tomorrow morning. Their rivals ahead will face the worst of the conditions, sweeping away the gravel to leave a cleaner and faster driving line for the Focus RS pair behind.

As a newcomer to the WRC, none of the front-running drivers had competitive experience of Jordan's speed tests, most of which have been purpose-built for the rally. Also new to most were the extreme temperatures. Shade temperatures hovered just below 40°C for the past two days and several degrees higher in the sun. Although 36°C was today's high, it was still uncomfortably hot inside the cars as competitors tackled eight special stages covering 115.18km. Three were held below sea level and one reached the world's lowest land point at more than 400 metres beneath sea level.

Latvala settled into third this morning before climbing to second on the final special stage of the loop. The 23-year-old Finn admitted he was finding it tricky to acclimatise to the roads. "They were more slippery than I thought and it was hard to be fully confident," he said. "The gravel roads are as hard as asphalt so the tyres were spinning because they didn't break the surface. I spent too much time sideways, which was wearing my tyres, so I tried to change my driving style. It's so different from any other event and they're not my favourite roads, but I need to be able to drive on every surface."

He opened the afternoon with fastest time on the stage along the shore of the Dead Sea before settling for top three times on the final three tests. He is 8.5sec behind leader Dani Sordo.

"It's an interesting battle and I didn't expect it to be this close. My speed is good and I have a great start position tomorrow so I'll see how things go in the morning, before deciding whether to push in the afternoon or steady my pace. My confidence improved this afternoon but I'm still working my tyres too hard. I tried to brake softly and be more precise in my driving but I have more to do," he added.

Hirvonen ended the morning fifth. Because he was second in the start order, the 27-year-old Finn had to cope with slippery gravel on the surface but a more serious hazard arose 7km from the finish of the second stage, the 20.00km Mahes.

"I had one of the luckiest escapes ever," he said. "My pace notes were too optimistic and I came over a crest too fast and went off when the road turned immediately afterwards.

There were some huge rocks which I just managed to avoid but I slightly damaged the rear right suspension. It didn't cost much time but the handling felt strange afterwards."

On this afternoon's repeat stages Hirvonen climbed to fourth, winning the final test and lying just 13.4sec from the lead. "Everything went to plan this afternoon. I didn't push too hard because there were many loose rocks in the road and I didn't want to hit one and damage the tyres. I attacked on the last gap to ensure the gap wasn't too large tonight and I'm happy with how it went today," he added.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and co-driver Michael Orr are 10th in another Focus RS, despite stalling several times at the start of the second stage and a small fire. "This hasn't been a good day for me," said Al Qassimi. "The back of the car caught fire at the end of stage six. The fire brigade had to put it out and although the next stage went OK, the flames were back at the end of stage eight." The problem was traced to a turbo sensor failure, which allowed the turbo to become too hot.

News from our Rivals

Dani Sordo (Citroen) led from the start, the Spaniard winning three stages to lead team-mate Sébastien Loeb by 1.1sec. The Frenchman also claimed three stage wins. Behind the BP Ford Abu Dhabi duo, Chris Atkinson (Subaru) held fifth with Urmo Aava (Citroen) an impressive sixth. The remaining four places in the top 10 were all claimed by Focus RS cars, headed by Stobart's Matthew Wilson in seventh. Per-Gunnar Andersson (Suzuki) retired after going off on the opening stage while team-mate Toni Gardemeister stopped with engine problems after stage 2. Petter Solberg (Subaru) retired from fifth with broken front suspension after stage six and Stobart driver Gigi Galli (Ford) retired from sixth after the same test. The Italian slid into a bank, damaging the rear differential cooler and exhaust, and the differential seized in the high temperatures. He will restart tomorrow under SupeRally rules.

Tomorrow's Route

The second day follows a similar format, with drivers again facing two identical loops of four stages, the bulk of which are north-east of the Dead Sea service park and close to the capital city of Amman. After restarting at 08.00, drivers tackle 109.94km of competition before returning for the final overnight halt at 16.29.

Leaderboard after Day 1

1. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	1hr 16min 53.7sec
2. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	1hr 16min 54.8sec
3. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 17min 02.2sec
4. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 17min 07.1sec
5. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	1hr 18min 01.7sec
6. U Aava/K Sikk	EST	Citroen C4	1hr 18min 53.0sec
7. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 19min 46.4sec
8. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 20min 16.0sec
9. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	1hr 20min 52.9sec
10 K Al Qassimi/M Orr	UAE	Ford Focus RS	1hr 20min 58.1sec

Stage Times

Stage 1: 1= Sordo, P Solberg 6min 40.2sec; **3= Hirvonen + 0.5; 4. Latvala + 1.6;** 5. Loeb + 4.6; 6. Galli + 13.0; **13. Al Qassimi + 20.6.**

Stage 2: 1. Sordo 13min 54.8sec; 2. P Solberg + 5.4; **3. Latvala + 8.9; 4. Hirvonen + 11.3;** 5. Loeb + 12.6; 6. Aava + 12.7; **14. Al Qassimi + 59.0.**
Overall: 1. Sordo 20min 35.0sec; 2. P Solberg + 5.4; **3. Latvala + 10.5; 4. Hirvonen + 11.8;** 5. Loeb + 17.2; 6. Aava + 27.9; **14. Al Qassimi + 1:19.6.**

Stage 3: 1. Sordo 8min 02.9sec; 2. Loeb + 4.7; **3. Latvala + 5.7; 4. Hirvonen + 6.5;** 5. Atkinson + 8.6; 6. P Solberg + 9.7; **11. Al Qassimi + 24.3.**
Overall: 1. Sordo 28min 37.9sec; 2. P Solberg + 15.1; **3. Latvala + 16.2; 4. Hirvonen + 18.3;** 5. Loeb + 21.9; 6. Atkinson + 39.8; **13. Al Qassimi + 1:43.9.**

Stage 4: 1. Loeb 9min 55.4sec; **2. Latvala + 5.0; 3. Hirvonen + 5.8;** 4= Sordo, P Solberg + 7.4; 6. Atkinson + 19.1; **8. Al Qassimi + 29.7.**
Overall: 1. Sordo 38min 40.7sec; **2. Latvala + 13.8;** 3. Loeb + 14.5; 4. P Solberg + 15.1; **5. Hirvonen + 16.7;** 6. Atkinson + 51.5; **12. Al Qassimi + 2:06.2.**

Stage 5: **1. Latvala 6min 37.7sec;** 2. Loeb + 1.0; **3. Hirvonen + 2.0;** 4. Sordo + 4.0; 5. Atkinson + 4.4; 6. P Solberg + 5.8; **10. Al Qassimi + 18.2.**
Overall: 1. Sordo 38min 40.7sec; **2. Latvala + 9.8;** 3. Loeb + 11.5; **4. Hirvonen + 14.7;** 5. P Solberg + 16.9; 6. Atkinson + 51.9; **13. Al Qassimi + 2:20.4.**

Stage 6: 1. Loeb 13min 38.5sec; 2. Sordo + 1.1; **3. Latvala + 2.6; 4. Hirvonen + 7.1;** 5. Atkinson + 9.7; 6. Aava + 19.4; **11. Al Qassimi + 55.9.**
Overall: 1. Sordo 59min 02.0sec; 2. Loeb + 10.4; **3. Latvala + 11.3; 4. Hirvonen + 20.7;** 5. Atkinson + 1:00.5; 6. Galli + 1:33.4; **12. Al Qassimi + 3:15.2.**

Stage 7: 1. Loeb 7min 52.6sec; **2. Latvala + 3.7; 3. Hirvonen + 5.1;** 4. Sordo + 5.7; 5. Atkinson + 10.6; 6. Aava + 17.7; **10. Al Qassimi + 29.0.**
Overall: 1. Sordo 1hr 07min 00.3sec; 2. Loeb + 4.7; **3. Latvala + 9.3; 4. Hirvonen + 20.1;** 5. Atkinson + 1:05.4; 6. Aava + 1:48.8; **11. Al Qassimi + 3:38.5.**

Stage 8: **1. Hirvonen 9min 46.7sec;** 2. Loeb + 3.1; **3. Latvala + 5.9;** 4. Sordo + 6.7; 5. Atkinson + 9.3; 6. Aava + 17.2; **10. Al Qassimi + 32.6.**
Overall: 1. Sordo 1hr 16min 53.7sec; 2. Loeb + 1.1; **3. Latvala + 8.5; 4. Hirvonen + 13.4;** 5. Atkinson + 1:08.0; 6. Aava + 1:59.3; **11. Al Qassimi + 4:04.4.**