

Jordan Rally - after stage 4, Mal'n 1

The first world championship rally in an Arab country since 1976 clicked into gear at last night's start ceremony alongside the Dead Sea – the lowest point on earth at more than 400m below sea level. The action began in earnest this morning as competitors headed to the first of two identical loops of four gravel speed tests north and east of the Dead Sea service park. After two days where temperatures neared 40°C, cloudy skies quickly cleared to again send temperatures soaring.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Jari-Matti Latvala and Mikko Anttila made a strong start to this fifth round of the championship in their Focus RS World Rally Car amid the breathtaking scenery of the Jordan Valley. They settled into third through the opening three special stages and second on the loop's final test, the 13.46km Mal'n, promoted him to second, 13.8sec from the lead.

"The roads are more slippery than I thought and it's hard to be fully confident," said 23-year-old Latvala. "The gravel roads are as hard as asphalt so the tyres are spinning because they're not breaking the surface. I'm spending too much time sideways, which is wearing my tyres, so I need 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. I had a few small escapes, but no big dramas."

Team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen lie fifth in their Focus RS, 16.7sec from the lead. As Hirvonen is 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. I'm happy with fifth and this would be a perfect position for the start order tomorrow, so long as the gap to the leader doesn't become bigger.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and co-driver Michael Orr are 12th in another Focus RS. "It's loose and slippery. As soon as I push for more pace I'm losing traction and it's difficult to control the car.

There are many blind corners with huge rocks and it's the same with the crests. The cars before me must have been digging up the rocks because they are in the middle of the road," said Al Qassimi.

Leaderboard after stage 4 of 22

1. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	38min 40.7sec
2. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	38min 54.5sec
3. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	38min 55.2sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	38min 55.8sec
5. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	38min 57.4sec
6. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	39min 32.2sec
7. G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	39min 50.1sec
8. U Aava/K Sikk	EST	Citroen C4	39min 51.0sec

9. M Wilson/S Martin
10 C Rautenbach/D Senior

GBR
ZIM

Ford Focus RS
Citroen C4

40min 06.4sec
40min 28.7sec