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## **Ford's Finns remain solid after tricky opening day in Sardinia**

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team completed today's opening leg of Rally d'Italia Sardegna with its lead pairings each holding points-scoring positions after a difficult day's competition on the Mediterranean island. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen, leaders of the drivers' standings in the FIA World Rally Championship, hold fourth in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car. Team-mates and fellow Finns Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila are seventh at the wheel of another Focus RS.

Latvala led this sixth round of the championship this morning before a mistake sent him tumbling down the leaderboard but he recovered well to climb the order again. Hirvonen was never truly happy with his performance, although the Finn was hindered by running first in the start order when road conditions were at their most difficult this morning.

Following last night's start ceremony in the exclusive resort of Porto Cervo, perched on Sardinia's shimmering Costa Smeralda coastline, competitors tackled two identical loops of three narrow gravel speed tests south of the rally base in Olbia. Clouds covered the normally sun-kissed holiday island throughout the 131.56km of competition and a stiff breeze kept temperatures lower than anticipated.

As championship leader Hirvonen was first in the start order all day. Conditions were slippery throughout, but during the morning he was unsure whether that was due to heavy rain earlier this week or loose gravel on the road surface. He completed the opening loop tied in third before dropping one position this afternoon. The 27-year-old Finn is just 5.1sec from third and in the middle of a fierce four-car battle which is covered by just over 18sec.

"My feeling with the car was good and the handling was fine but when I tried to control my speed it didn't work," said Hirvonen. "I've not had the pace and I don't know why because I've not been over-driving. I want to go and check the data from my car to try to find where I'm losing time. Jari-Matti has a slightly different set-up so I'll check his data too. It was slippery all day but it wasn't just me that was affected by that. It's still possible to get to second, which is the minimum I want from this rally.

"This morning the roads were really slippery and I couldn't push any harder. At times I was driving from ditch to ditch and in places I eased off because I didn't want to go off the road. I'm not sure if I was losing time because I was cleaning the loose gravel, or because I was breaking the damp surface and the cars behind had better grip. It was a strange day," he added.

Latvala made a blistering start by posting fastest time through the opening stage. However, the 23-year-old Finn was caught out by the narrow tracks on the following 33.96km Crastazza test and punctured the rear left tyre after sliding wide and swiping a bank. He dropped more than 90sec and slipped to 14th.

"It was my mistake and all I can do is look in the mirror to see the reason why," said Latvala. "Maybe my pace notes were too quick, but at a downhill right bend about 18km after the start I hit a soft bank and the tyre came away from the rim and went down

straight away. As it was a rear tyre I decided not to stop and change it because I would lose too much time and that proved the right decision. I had made my notes quicker than last year and although it was a fast corner, it was also narrow."

He began his fightback immediately with three second fastest times before victory on the final stage lifted him into seventh. "I was happy with my speed this afternoon and I need to keep the same pace tomorrow. If I can do that a top five finish is still possible. My start position tomorrow will be good if it stays dry. I had a good pre-event test and both the car and tyres felt perfect. I tried to keep the car straighter and not go sideways and my tyres remained in really good condition as a result," he added.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr were 14th in another Focus RS until they hit a rock on the afternoon's opening stage and retired from the leg. They will restart tomorrow under SuperRally rules. "I tried to lift the pace – my confidence was high, I had good grip and things were going well," said Al Qassimi. "I entered a blind corner around 10km from the start that was hidden by a bush and saw this huge bedded rock - with an edge sticking out into the road – too late and hit it at speed. I damaged the front left of the car, including mechanical components like the driveshaft and steering arm. It was a bad corner and there was no way we could continue. I'm disappointed because I was gaining pace and time but this is part of the sport,"

## News from our rivals

Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) moved to the front on the second stage and set three fastest times as he built a 35.7sec advantage over team-mate Dani Sordo, who improved his car's balance this afternoon. Petter Solberg (Subaru) was unhappy with his car's shock absorbers this morning but changes in service helped the Norwegian climb from fifth to third. Team-mate Chris Atkinson went the other way, the Australian holding third this morning before ending the day in fifth. Stobart's Gigi Galli (Ford) dropped a minute on the second stage with a rear left puncture but the Italian delighted home fans by winning one stage and posting top three times on all the others to recover to sixth. Andreas Mikkelsen (Ford) was fifth fastest on the opening test but rolled out on the next stage.

## Tomorrow's route

The second day is the longest of the rally and again comprises two identical loops of three stages, split by a return to Olbia for service. The opening stage is based in the same territory as today, while the other two are slightly further inland in the Gallura region. After leaving Olbia at 08.00, drivers cover 134.60km of competition before returning for the final overnight halt at 18.44.

## Leaderboard after Day 1

1. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	1hr 31min 27.6sec
2. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	1hr 32min 03.3sec
3. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	1hr 32min 21.4sec
<b>4. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen</b>	<b>FIN</b>	<b>Ford Focus RS</b>	<b>1hr 32min 26.5sec</b>
5. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	1hr 32min 36.6sec
<b>6. G Galli/G Bernacchini</b>	<b>ITA</b>	<b>Ford Focus RS</b>	<b>1hr 32min 39.9sec</b>
7. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 32min 58.7sec
8. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 33min 20.1sec

9. U Aava/K Sikk	EST	Citroen C4	1hr 33min 47.4sec
10 T Gardemeister/T Tuominen	FIN	Suzuki SX4	1hr 33min 50.5sec

### Stage times

Stage 1: **1. Latvala 11min 24.3sec**; 2. Sordo + 7.0; 3. Galli + 7.4; 4. Loeb + 7.8; 5. Mikkelsen + 9.6; 6. P Solberg + 10.7; **8. Hirvonen + 16.0**; **17. Al Qassimi + 48.1**.

Stage 2: 1. Loeb 23min 56.1sec; 2. Sordo + 18.2; **3. Hirvonen + 20.9**; 4. Atkinson + 25.2; 5. P Solberg + 29.1; 6. Gardemeister + 36.9; **14. Al Qassimi + 1:17.3**; **16. Latvala + 1:41.0**.  
Overall: 1. Loeb 35min 28.2sec; 2. Sordo + 17.4; **3. Hirvonen + 29.1**; 4. Atkinson + 30.4; 5. P Solberg + 32.0; 6. Gardemeister + 53.4; **14. Latvala + 1:33.2**; **15. Al Qassimi + 1:57.6**.

Stage 3: 1. Loeb 10min 48.3sec; **2. Latvala + 4.4**; 3. Galli + 4.6; 4. Sordo + 5.1; 5. Atkinson + 8.4; **6. Hirvonen + 9.7**; **13. Al Qassimi + 38.6**.  
Overall: 1. Loeb 46min 16.5sec; 2. Sordo + 22.5; **3= Hirvonen, Atkinson + 16.3**; 5. P Solberg + 44.3; 6. Aava + 1:11.5; **11. Latvala + 1:37.6**; **14. Al Qassimi + 2:36.2**.

Stage 4: 1. Galli 11min 07.3sec; **2. Latvala + 1.5**; 3. P Solberg + 3.9; 4. Sordo + 8.5; **5= Hirvonen, Loeb + 9.0**.  
Overall: 1. Loeb 57min 32.8sec; 2. Sordo + 22.0; **3. Hirvonen + 38.8**; 4. P Solberg + 39.2; 5. Atkinson + 40.9; 6. Galli + 1:07.6; **10. Latvala + 1:30.1**.

Stage 5: 1. Loeb 23min 21.4sec; **2. Latvala + 3.5**; 3. Galli + 3.6; 4. Sordo + 7.5; 5. P Solberg + 9.7; **6. Hirvonen + 11.8**.  
Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 20min 54.2sec; 2. Sordo + 29.5; 3. P Solberg + 48.9; **4. Hirvonen + 50.6**; 5. Atkinson + 58.0; 6. Galli + 1:11.2; **7. Latvala + 1:33.6**.

Stage 6: **1. Latvala 10min 30.9sec**; 2. Loeb + 2.5; 3. Galli + 3.6; 4. H Solberg + 6.9; 5. P Solberg + 7.4; 6. Sordo + 8.7; **7. Hirvonen + 11.8**.  
Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 31min 27.6sec; 2. Sordo + 35.7; 3. P Solberg + 53.8; **4. Hirvonen + 58.9**; 5. Atkinson + 1:09.0; 6. Galli + 1:12.3; **7. Latvala + 1:31.1**.