

For immediate release: 23 May 2008

Going gets tough as Ford strives to add to win record in Greece

Rocky mountain tracks, punishing heat and physically demanding cockpit conditions are the hallmarks of the Acropolis Rally of Greece (29 May - 1 June), widely regarded as the toughest challenge in the FIA World Rally Championship calendar. It is a trial in which BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team, leader of both the manufacturers' and drivers' standings, has excelled to claim six wins in the last eight years with the Focus RS World Rally Car.

Success in Greece, round seven of the 15-event series and one of the championship's classic fixtures, demands a blend of strength, reliability and speed. Drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen and team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila will hope to reproduce the form which powered them to second and third in Italy earlier this month to keep Ford on top in both title races. The team heads the manufacturers' battle by seven points and Hirvonen tops the drivers' table by three points.

The Acropolis Rally's gravel speed tests west of Athens have a fearsome reputation. Cars must withstand severe punishment from loose rocks which litter the surface of the mountain tracks as well as hard bedrock which forms the base of the roads. Air temperatures often exceed 30°C, placing high demands on engines and gearboxes. Because the winding roads and hairpins make this a relatively slow rally (only Argentina was slower in 2007), there is little cooling from the through-flow of air.

Drivers, too, can expect a tough time for the same reasons. There is no cooling inside the cars during special stages so cockpit temperatures are high and fitness plays a crucial role. A regular fluid intake is also vital to stave off dehydration and ensure drivers and co-drivers operate at peak performance.

Twenty-seven-year-old Hirvonen finished third in both 2006 and 2007 and five starts have given him plenty of experience of what lies ahead.

"The Acropolis is usually the hottest rally in the championship but having been to Jordan last month where temperatures were close to 40°C, I don't think we will experience that kind of heat here," said Hirvonen. "Although Jordan was also abrasive, I think Greece will be more so. There are plenty of loose rocks, especially during the second pass of stages, and the road base is hard bedrock. That's why the rally has earned its reputation as a car-breaker.

"The conditions are tough on cars and tyres but I'm not worried about either. The Focus RS has proved its strength many times. Pirelli's tyres have also been remarkably strong this year with few punctures. The heat and rough roads will combine to make tyre wear greater than on other gravel events so I'll need to remember that I must look after them," he added.

Latvala, fourth in the drivers' standings, made his World Rally Car debut in a Focus RS in Greece in 2003 when he was just 18. "That was a very special moment," said the 23-year-old Finn. "It was only my second world rally and I was so tired from the heat because

it was a new experience for me in the hot conditions. My car was totally reliable and I finished 10th, which at 18 years old was amazing.

"This is my fifth start but I expect it to be just as tough. Last year's rally contained a 48km stage which gave us difficulties with tyres. This year that test has been split into two so it should be easier for tyres, cars and drivers. My podium in Italy has given me great confidence after Argentina and Jordan weren't so good for me, and I believe I can take that pace to Greece," added Latvala.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr will drive a third team Focus RS on a rally that the 36-year-old driver finished in 2004 and 2006. "A lot has changed since then but it's still a very rough rally," he said. "Some places are similar to Jordan, others to Sardinia, but some are distinctive only to the Acropolis. Although there are several new stages, Michael has a lot of experience here. Together we had a long consultation with my engineers after Sardinia and I hope we see the results in Greece.

"Without testing things are always difficult and I'm going to have to keep improving my technique and adapting my style as I go along. I'll start at a comfortable pace and see how the car is reacting. If things are going well, I'll increase my pace," he added.

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 are nominated for points by the Stobart VK M-Sport team while Matthew Wilson / Scott Martin will drive a third car. Munchi's Ford World Rally Team has nominated Federico Villagra / Jorge Pérez Companc and Greeks Aris Vovos / 'El-Em' to score.

* Hirvonen will conduct a two-day asphalt test in Scotland on 5 - 6 June.

* Lehtinen attended Wednesday's night's UEFA Champions League soccer final between Manchester United and Chelsea in Moscow as a guest of Ford of Europe. Ford is a major partner of the Champions League and used the half-time break to premiere its 60-second TV advertisement for the all-new Kuga vehicle.

Rally route

For the third consecutive year, the rally has a new base. It will be centred at the military airport of Tatoi, 20km north of the centre of Athens. The airfield hosted a stage of the rally in 1975 and this year will also be home to a gravel super special stage on Friday evening and the rally's finale on Sunday afternoon. Also new for 2008 is the start ceremony at the famous Acropolis, high above the city and for many years the traditional start location. The route itself is broadly similar to 2007. The opening leg heads north and west of Athens, and contains the only all-new test of the rally. The second day is the longest of the event

and takes competitors west of the city, passing close to the Corinth Canal. The final day is again north-west of the city before the finish ceremony at Tatoi. Drivers tackle 20 tests covering 339.94km in a total route of 1311.32km.