

For immediate release: 1 March 2008

## Rally Mexico bites hard but Ford drivers hold firm in top five

Despite setbacks for both cars, BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team ended the second day of Rally Mexico in a strong position as the only squad with both pairings in the top five on the leaderboard. Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila are third in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car with team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen in fifth as this opening gravel encounter of the FIA World Rally Championship season continued to pose problems for the leading competitors.

Latvala, who claimed his maiden victory in Sweden last month, was engaged in an enthralling fight for the lead with Sébastien Loeb until a broken turbo pipe this afternoon cost over two minutes. Hirvonen was comfortable in fourth until a double puncture this afternoon cost a place on the leaderboard.

Today was the longest of this third round of the series. Drivers tackled 157.32km of competition, split into two identical loops of three speed tests in the hot and dusty mountains north and east of the rally base in León, before two more passes over the super special stage on the edge of the city. Temperatures again hovered just under 30°C in the city, although they were a few degrees cooler in the hills as the route took competitors up to 2600m.

Overnight leader Latvala had the dubious privilege of being first in the start order in his Focus RS. It meant the 22-year-old Finn had to cope all morning with the same slippery loose stones on the road surface that hampered Hirvonen in the same position yesterday. His disadvantage was typified on the opening special stage when he dropped 9.5sec to Loeb, but he got to grips with the conditions on the following two tests to end the loop just 5.8sec behind the Frenchman.

The battle continued on cleaner roads this afternoon until a broken turbo charge pipe on the second test slowed the BP Ford Abu Dhabi driver. Latvala and Anttila tried to make repairs after the stage but to no avail and they dropped over two minutes during the rest of the day before the team could replace it.

"About 1km after the start of the stage the car suddenly lost power, with no warning," said Latvala. "The pipe between the intercooler and the turbo came loose and I had some power, but not full boost. We wrapped some aluminium tape around it before the next stage but it didn't help. I couldn't fight with Loeb for the lead this afternoon and I wanted to do that. It was bad luck but it's not my time yet to win this rally. I'm still third though and tomorrow I will drive to save my podium.

"The first stage this morning was slippery and I couldn't find the right way to drive. I understand how difficult it was for Mikko yesterday. I was cleaning the corners and that's the difference between first in the start order and second, where I was yesterday. There were many different grip levels on the loose stones and it was hard for braking. In the third stage I did everything I could, and maybe too much, because I had a close escape after a crest when the car was totally off the road," he added.

Hirvonen restarted in fifth but quickly moved into fourth, without ever feeling truly happy with his performance. However, two punctures on the opening afternoon stage, one of which he stopped to change, cost almost three minutes. Caution was the watchword through the final four stages, with both spare wheels that competitors are allowed to carry in the car already used. He is just 15.9sec behind fourth-placed Henning Solberg.

"Early in the stage, there was a big rock on the inside of a fast right bend," he explained. "I couldn't avoid it and hit it with both right wheels. I immediately knew the front tyre was punctured and stopped to change it but didn't notice the rear puncture. It was only after a couple of kilometres more that the rear tyre started to slowly lose pressure. I had to be really careful in left corners and actually slid off the road at one point. Now my aim is to catch Henning for fourth tomorrow.

"I made some small changes last night and the car didn't slide as much this morning but I drove too cautiously. I was better than yesterday but I don't deserve a 'well done' yet. It was better not being first on the road but I started this morning with the intention of driving flat out and while I drove fast, improvements are still needed. I'm at the same pace as last year and it's not enough," he added.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson said Latvala's problems were 'unfortunate'. "He's still third and so many drivers have had problems that the rally isn't over yet. Mikko had a tough day but he made it back and will be out there battling again tomorrow," he said.

## News from our Rivals

Fastest time on the opening two tests carried Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) into the lead. He won another three stages this afternoon to finish 61.4sec ahead of Chris Atkinson (Subaru). The Australian's only concern was a problem with the car's launch control system. Behind Latvala, Munchi's driver Henning Solberg (Ford) capitalised on Hirvonen's punctures to move into fourth, despite brake trouble on the opening test. Stobart's Matthew Wilson (Ford) climbed to sixth, despite spinning and stalling on the morning's final test. Dani Sordo (Citroen), competing under SupeRally rules after retiring yesterday, won two stages as he fought to climb into the manufacturers' points. The only major retirement was Petter Solberg (Subaru) who stopped after a broken driveshaft on stage 10 cost four minutes.

## Tomorrow's Route

The final day is a short, sharp affair with just four stages and 60.69km for competitors to tackle. After a 07.45 start, they face three tests north and east of León before a final pass over the super special stage on the edge of the city. The finish ceremony is at 13.00.

## Leaderboard after Day 2

1. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	3hr 08min 39.8sec
2. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	3hr 09min 41.2sec
3. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 10min 46.2sec
4. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	3hr 12min 31.4sec
5. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 12min 47.3sec
6. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	3hr 14min 50.4sec
7. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	3hr 26min 54.1sec
8. R Trivino/C Salom	MEX	Peugeot 206	3hr 28min 10.9sec
9. S Ogier/J Ingrassia	FRA	Citroen C2	3hr 31min 10.6sec
10 J Mölder/F Micolte	EST	Suzuki Swift	3hr 32min 42.7sec