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Hirvonen sweeps to Jordan win as Ford extends world series lead

Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen claimed their first victory of the season on an enthralling Jordan Rally today. The BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team pair returned to the lead of the drivers' standings in the FIA World Rally Championship after winning by 1min 15.7sec in a Focus RS World Rally Car. Team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila were seventh in another Focus RS, as reigning world champion Ford extended its lead in the manufacturers' championship to seven points.

Jordan's debut in the WRC marked the first Arab rally to appear in the series since 1976. Blistering temperatures, which hovered just below 40°C for much of the three-day event, and hard-packed gravel speed tests in the Jordan Valley made it a punishing event for man and machine. However, the Focus RS excelled and showed a blend of speed, strength and reliability to fill seven of the top nine places.

This fifth round of the series was based on the shores of the Dead Sea, and competitors raced through the earth's lowest land point at more than 400 metres below sea level. They tackled 22 speed tests covering 359.26km, the bulk of which were on purpose-built roads amid stunning Jordanian scenery.

Tactics played a huge part in BP Ford Abu Dhabi's success. After Latvala and Hirvonen climbed to first and second yesterday afternoon, they slowed during the final metres of yesterday's last special stage to allow main rival Dani Sordo to hold the overnight lead. In doing so, the Focus RS drivers forced the Spaniard into first in today's start order, handing him the disadvantage of sweeping slippery loose gravel from the roads to allow the Finnish pairing a cleaner and faster line behind.

Their strategy worked perfectly and both Latvala and Hirvonen leapfrogged Sordo on the first stage this morning. When Latvala suffered suspension problems, 27-year-old Hirvonen broke clear and went into the final stage along the border between Jordan and Israel's West Bank with a 23.7sec advantage over Sordo, which he extended during that final test.

"My strategy paid off but I was nervous in the final stage," said Hirvonen. "No split times were available for Sordo and I didn't know how hard he was pushing. I really needed these 10 points and this is a great result for my championship challenge. I need to keep my feet on the ground and continue trying to find more speed and more wins. I've learned how important it is to consistently score points on every rally but 10 is perfect. It was a tough rally but it's good to lead the series again.

"When I woke up it was raining but as we were in Jordan I hoped it wouldn't last so that the gravel wasn't dampened down. It stopped quickly, although I expected the driving line to be cleaner. It was really slippery, just like the ball-bearing surface in Australia, and hard to keep on the road," he added.

Latvala's victory hopes ended when he dropped almost a minute in today's second stage with broken rear left suspension. The crew worked feverishly to bind the

suspension together sufficiently for the next marathon 41km stage and they did a superb job to simply complete the test. They dropped 10 minutes to fall to eighth and returned to the service park where the mechanics did an equally impressive job to replace the gearbox, rear differential and rear suspension and keep 23-year-old Latvala in the points. He climbed to seventh during the final loop.

"In the morning's first stage I hit a rock, but felt nothing," he said. "Halfway through the next test the support link in the rear left suspension snapped. After the stage we tried to strap the suspension together but it wouldn't hold and I had to drive many kilometres with the tyre bent in. I was lucky to get back. I had two perfect days on Friday and Saturday but today was a long one. I need to be more consistent and concentrate without making mistakes. I'm disappointed not to score more points."

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr finished ninth in another Focus RS. Al Qassimi was seventh and on course to score his first points until punctures on the final stage cost two places. However, it was still his best WRC finish. "I'm happy but also a little disappointed because I suffered two flat tyres on the last stage when I was fighting for a drivers' point. I had to stop and fix both tyres, which cost me lots of time. I've never been in a points scoring position before and unfortunately luck wasn't on my side.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson said: "It was almost a dream weekend, but it was a fantastic team performance. Our strategy worked perfectly and it's great for Mikko to claim his first win this season and for us to lead both championships again. Full credit to Jari-Matti for nursing the car back to the service park after his problems. Compliments to the rally organisers - on their first time in the WRC, they created a classic event."

A spectating Ford of Europe President and CEO John Fleming said: "For the past three days I've seen just how demanding this rally is. The heat was intense, the stages were tough and only the fittest survived. But we did more than survive - we won the rally and the Focus RS packed the leaderboard. It's great to see the Blue Oval back on top of both the manufacturers' and drivers' standings.

Ford of Europe's motorsport director Mark Deans said: "Despite the high temperatures and arduous road conditions, to place seven cars in the top nine is a tribute to the performance and durability of the Ford Focus."

News from our Rivals

Starting first on the road cost Dani Sordo (Citroen) valuable time today. He had to settle for second after a spin on the final stage cost more than 40sec. Chris Atkinson (Subaru) scored his fourth podium in five events in third with Stobart's Henning Solberg (Ford) in fourth. Fifth-placed Matthew Wilson (Ford) clipped a bridge parapet on the final stage this morning and punctured the rear left tyre. The Stobart driver had to stop and replace it, losing two minutes and fourth place. He held off the challenge from Munchi's Federico Villagra (Ford), who equalled a career-best sixth. Urmo Aava (Citroen) retired from fifth after breaking his car's front right suspension in the second stage this morning, while Per-Gunnar Andersson (Suzuki) retired on the next test after sliding into a ditch.

Next round

Following three rounds outside Europe, the championship returns there next month for Rally d'Italia Sardegna. The all-gravel event is based in Olbia on 15 - 18 May.

Final positions (subject to routine fuel analysis)

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	4hr 02min 47.9sec
2. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	4hr 04min 03.6sec
3. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	4hr 07min 47.4sec
4. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	4hr 10min 23.7sec
5. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	4hr 13min 29.6sec
6. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	4hr 14min 10.1sec
7. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	4hr 15min 03.5sec
8. G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	4hr 15min 12.3sec
9. K Al Qassimi/M Orr	UAE	Ford Focus RS	4hr 21min 53.6sec
10 S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	4hr 26min 26.0sec

Drivers

1. M Hirvonen	35pts
2. S Loeb	30pts
3. C Atkinson	28pts
4. J-M Latvala	18pts
5. D Sordo	17pts
6. G Galli	12pts

Manufacturers

1. BP Ford Abu Dhabi	57pts
2. Citroen Total	50pts
3. Subaru	39pts
4. Stobart VK M-Sport	29pts
5. Munchi's Ford	14pts
6. Suzuki	6pts

Stage Times

Stage 17: 1. Hirvonen 11min 02.5sec; 2. Latvala + 1.6; 3. Loeb + 3.5; 4. Sordo + 12.5; 5. Galli + 14.0; 6. Villagra + 24.4; 11. Al Qassimi + 35.3.

Overall: 1. Latvala 2hr 40min 15.5sec; 2. Hirvonen + 0.3; 3. Sordo + 2.4; 4. Atkinson + 2:18.8; 5. Aava + 3:24.0; 6. Wilson + 5:13.8; 9. Al Qassimi + 7:35.7.

Stage 18: 1. Loeb 7min 10.1sec; 2. Galli + 6.4; 3. Hirvonen + 9.3; 4. Andersson + 11.8; 5. Sordo + 12.6; 6. Wilson + 19.0; 10. Al Qassimi + 25.7; 15. Latvala + 59.4.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 2hr 47min 35.2sec; 2. Sordo + 5.4; 3. Latvala + 49.8; 4. Atkinson + 2:29.8; 5. Wilson + 5:23.2; 6. H Solberg + 5:49.1; 8. Al Qassimi + 7:51.8.

Stage 19: 1. Loeb 28min 32.8sec; 2. Hirvonen + 4.0; 3. Sordo + 6.3; 4. Galli + 29.9; 5. H Solberg + 37.4; 6. Atkinson + 53.0; 9. Al Qassimi + 1:54.6; 35. Latvala + 10:19.0.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 3hr 16min 12.0sec; 2. Sordo + 7.7; 3. Atkinson + 3:18.8; 4. H Solberg + 6:22.5; 5. Wilson + 8:41.7; 6. Villagra + 8:50.3; 7. Al Qassimi + 8:50.3; 8. Latvala + 11:54.8.

Stage 20: 1. Latvala 11min 00.4sec; 2. Loeb + 6.0; 3. Hirvonen + 8.5; 4. Galli + 11.9; 5. Sordo + 21.6; 6. H Solberg + 26.8; 10. Al Qassimi + 38.1.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 3hr 27min 20.9sec; 2. Sordo + 20.8; 3. Atkinson + 3:40.3; 4. H Solberg + 6:40.8; 5. Wilson + 9:10.3; 6. Villagra + 9:13.5; 7. Al Qassimi + 10:12.0; 8. Latvala + 11:46.3.

Stage 21: 1. Loeb 7min 04.8sec; 2. Galli + 3.9; **3. Hirvonen + 13.1**; 4. Sordo + 16.0; 5. H Solberg + 16.8; 6. Wilson + 20.7; **7. Latvala + 21.3**; **11. Al Qassimi + 31.5**.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 3hr 34min 38.8sec**; 2. Sordo + 23.7; 3. Atkinson + 3:51.8; 4. H Solberg + 6:44.5; 5. Wilson + 9:17.9; 6. Villagra + 9:26.0; **7. Al Qassimi + 10:30.4**; **9. Latvala + 11:54.5**.

Stage 22: **1. Hirvonen 28min 09.1sec**; 2. Loeb + 10.4; **3. Latvala + 21.1**; 4. Galli + 33.9; 5. H Solberg + 51.3; 6. Sordo + 52.0; **30. Al Qassimi + 8:35.3**.

Overall: **1. Hirvonen 4hr 02min 47.9sec**; 2. Sordo + 1:15.7; 3. Atkinson + 4:59.5; 4. H Solberg + 7:35.8; 5. Wilson + 10:41.7; 6. Villagra + 11:22.2; **7. Latvala + 12:15.6**; **9. Al Qassimi + 19:05.7**.

For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Baskerville on the **BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team** media desk at Dead Sea Tel: + 962 5 3560 083. Images available on www.worldrallypics.com/ford