

For immediate release: 28 November 2008

Ford's fight for world title goes to final round face-off in Wales

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team takes its challenge for a third consecutive manufacturers' world title to the final round of the FIA World Rally Championship in Wales next week. The squad must overturn an 11-point deficit on Wales Rally GB (4 - 7 December) with the record-breaking Ford Focus RS World Rally Car, so realistically nothing less than a fourth 1-2 finish of the season from Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen and team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila will suffice.

Both Finnish pairings have good records over the fast forest roads in Wales. Hirvonen won here last year while Latvala finished fourth in 2006 and posted a string of special stage wins last year while recovering from a first day time loss.

All but one of the 19 speed tests are held on privately-owned gravel tracks, more commonly used either by lorries transporting timber or military vehicles. They are narrow but fast and invite attacking driving, while Friday's opening leg offers the rare challenge of competition in full darkness. However, it is Britain's unpredictable weather that can make this 15th round of the series so demanding.

The hilly forests in south and mid-Wales can be evil in early December if wintry weather takes a firm grip. Tree-lined sections high in the forests contrast with wide open stretches, both on military land and where forestry work has removed the timber. In gloomy weather fog hangs between the trees while throwing a white blanket across exposed areas on higher ground. The gravel surface can be treacherously muddy and early-morning ice or even snow is possible if temperatures plunge.

Twenty-eight-year-old Hirvonen, who identified the weather as the trickiest aspect, likened parts of the rally to his home event in Finland. "Some parts of the rally are very fast, even quicker than in Finland. The difference is that the fast parts here don't last long because there are usually hairpin bends that bring the speeds down again. The nature of the roads changes more than in Finland," said Hirvonen, for whom this will be his sixth Rally GB start.

"Last year was probably the toughest Rally GB I have ever driven. Driving in darkness in fog and rain was incredibly difficult. Night driving makes the rally even trickier, because this is the only round where we drive in the dark apart from Japan and Monte Carlo. It's something I will practise during my test this weekend. I feel confident and think we have a good chance of a 1-2 finish and if we can do that I hope it's enough to win the title for Ford," he added.

Twenty-three-year-old Latvala began his career in Britain aged just 17 in 2002 and is preparing for his seventh Rally GB. "I regard this as my second home rally. I drove many rallies here in 2002 and 2003 and I'm familiar with the nature of the roads. It's a classic rally and one that I would really like to win. The mid-Wales stages will be new to many drivers but I have something in my memory of those roads from those seasons. They are high on the hills and quite open, but enjoyable to drive," he said.

Latvala tested in darkness last week in preparation for the rally. "When it's dark and gloomy in Wales, then it's incredibly dark. If it rains the roads become very muddy and conditions can be really difficult. Night driving is specialised so it was important for me to test in the dark and get used to driving with the extra lights we fit to the car.

"Fog is probably the most difficult weather in which to drive, especially if it's dark as well. A driver needs to feel confident with the pace notes, be brave and rely heavily on the co-driver. If the notes are not precise enough then it's easy to lose confidence quickly. On the other hand, a good performance in those conditions can gain a lot of time," added Latvala.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr will drive a third official Focus RS WRC. "This will be my GB debut and I had a two-day test last week to get used to the conditions. I don't like wet weather rallies so it will be hard to adjust to. It's easy to slide, spin or go off in those conditions. The test was important because driving on mud in the forests helped me find my pace," said Al Qassimi.

"This is my last event of a long year, my first full season. It's gone well and I feel I'm progressing better than last year. After 10 events this year, I feel I'm part of the team on merit. I've gained extra mileage, extra confidence, achieved some good results and generally lifted my pace. I've made many changes to my notes and all the time I'm developing my knowledge and experience," 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 soft 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.

* Seven other Focus RS cars will start. Matthew Wilson / Scott Martin and François Duval / Denis Giraudet are nominated by the Stobart VK M-Sport squad, which has also entered Henning Solberg / Cato Menkerud, Barry Clark / Paul Nagle, Steve Perez / Paul Spooner, Dave Weston / Aled Davies and Moto GP ace Valentino Rossi and Carlo Cassina. Nine Fiesta STs are entered, of which seven will be tackling what is the final round of the Fiesta Sporting Trophy International.

* Double world champion and Ford ambassador Marcus Grönholm will entertain the crowds at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium before Saturday's stage by giving a pre-production version of the all-new Focus RS road car its public driving debut. Ford's fastest-ever European production car, which goes on sale next spring, will take pride of place in a cavalcade of heritage Rallye Sport (RS) cars.

Rally Route

Although the rally remains based in south Wales, major changes take competitors back to the classic mid-Wales forests of Hafren and Myherin for the first time in eight years. As a result the Brechfa Forest tests have been dropped. The start and finish remains in Cardiff with the service park again in Swansea's marina area, 70km away. The new mileage forms the bulk of the opening day, with two short spectator friendly tests at Walters Arena in Rheola Forest completing the action. Saturday mixes the long Resolfen test in the Vale of Neath with the traditional tests further north, run in the opposite direction to 2007, before a modified stage inside Cardiff's spectacular Millennium Stadium. The final day is based solely in the south. Drivers tackle 19 stages covering 348.99km in a route of 1428.44km.