

## Rally Mexico – after stage 3, El Cubilete 1

Huge crowds packed the narrow streets of Guanajuato last night for the spectacular start ceremony of this third round of the FIA World Rally Championship. Local music and dancing groups entertained the spectators before the 39 starters threaded their way through tens of thousands of fans as they made their way from this beautiful city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, back to the rally base in León.

The action began in earnest this morning when the cars left León for two identical loops of three speed tests east of the city, before two passes over a super special stage at the city's race circuit – a total of 135.74km of competition. Central Mexico has been blessed by dry and hot weather for some time, leaving a coating of loose stones on the surface of the gravel tracks in the hills above the city.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen and team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila were the first two cars in the start order. As a result the Finnish pairings endured the worst of the slippery conditions on the opening loop, sweeping the stones away with their Ford Focus RS World Rally Cars to leave a cleaner and faster driving line for those behind.

However, the conditions failed to slow Latvala who was fastest over the opening 22.96km Alfaro special stage. The 22-year-old, who became the youngest winner of a WRC round in Sweden earlier this month, was third through the following 23.83km Ortega and second in the 18.87km El Cubilete to return to the León service park with a 4.4sec lead over Sébastien Loeb.

"I started with plenty of confidence after Sweden and feel relaxed," he said. "I didn't expect to lead and my pre-event target was to look for a podium. I had some big impacts on stones but Pirelli's tyres stood up well. I had a few slides near the start of the second stage and hit the rear right on a bank. I was too late entering a left corner over a crest about 1.5km from the start and slid into the bank. The tyres worked well on the small surface stones but the grip felt different when the stones were bigger."

Hirvonen was fifth on all three tests to hold fourth position, 18.7sec behind his team-mate. "The morning was what I expected," said 27-year-old Hirvonen. "There was a lot of slippery loose gravel but the surface beneath is hard so it should be OK when we repeat the stages this afternoon. It was difficult in the braking areas and the loose gravel meant there was no traction accelerating out of the bends. I hit a small fence at the first braking point in stage two, but it wasn't a problem."

### Leaderboard after stage 3 of 20

1. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	40min 20.9sec
2. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	40min 25.3sec
3. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	40min 32.1sec
4. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	40min 39.6sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	41min 14.8sec
6. P-G Andersson/J Andersson	SWE	Suzuki SX4	41min 16.4sec
7. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	42min 02.0sec
8. G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	43min 04.8sec
9. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	42min 33.7sec
10 R Trivino/C Salom	MEX	Peugeot 206	44min 01.0sec