



## Rally Ireland – after stage 1, Stormont Super Special

The spectacular backdrop of Northern Ireland's Parliament buildings at Stormont in Belfast provided the ideal setting for the opening action to Rally Ireland tonight. The historic home of the Northern Ireland Assembly hosted a 1.82km super special stage in front of the magnificent buildings to launch this cross-border event's first appearance in the FIA World Rally Championship.

After this morning's final preparations in the rally base at Sligo, in north-west Ireland, drivers were flown to Belfast while their rally cars made the three-hour road journey on transporters. Before the stage BP-Ford World Rally Team driver and championship leader Marcus Grönholm was welcomed by Princess Anne, a member of the British royal family.

An estimated 10,000 fans lined the asphalt roads as two cars at a time completed two laps of the tight floodlit test.

Grönholm and co-driver Timo Rautiainen were paired with championship rival Sébastien Loeb in the top heat of the evening. The 39-year-old Finn, who heads the series by four points with just two rounds remaining, turned on the style in his Ford Focus RS World Rally Car to not only defeat the Frenchman by 0.9sec, but also set the fastest time of the evening to lead the rally.

"It was great to see so many people alongside the stage. I've heard a lot about the passion for rallying in Ireland and I really enjoyed the atmosphere here tonight. It was a fun way to start the event, but the competition starts for real in the morning on the country stages. They are narrow and bumpy with plenty of crests and dips and will be a real challenge," said Grönholm.

BP-Ford team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen took on Petter Solberg and lost by just 0.3sec after a tight encounter. The Finns lie equal sixth in their Focus RS.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Nicky Beech, driving a third BP-Ford-entered Focus RS were paired with Guy Wilks, with the Briton taking the honours. Al Qassimi lies 18th.

### Leaderboard after stage 1 of 20

1. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1min 30.8sec
2. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	1min 31.7sec
3. K Meeke/P Nagle	GB	Subaru Impreza	1min 31.8sec
4. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	1min 32.0sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	1min 32.2sec
6= J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1min 32.5sec
6= M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1min 32.5sec
8. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	1min 32.7sec
9= X Pons/X Amigo	E	Subaru Impreza	1min 33.3sec
9= M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	1min 33.3sec