



Rally Ireland – after stage 4, Lough Gill 1

All 84 starters returned safely from their late-night journey back to Sligo following last night's spectacular super special stage at Northern Ireland's Stormont Parliament buildings in Belfast. They departed a damp but mild Sligo this morning in darkness for the opening loop of three speed tests south-east of the town.

The narrow and bumpy asphalt lanes were extremely slippery, and became treacherously muddy as drivers cut corners and dragged dirt onto the already damp roads. BP-Ford World Rally Team drivers Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen and team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen opted for BFGoodrich's extra-soft compound tyres on their Focus RS World Rally Cars, with radial cuts carved into the rubber to offer additional grip.

FIA World Rally Championship leader and overnight pacesetter Grönholm was third through the opening 11.48km Geevagh and second in the following 27.90km Arigna to hold third overall, just 3.5sec from the lead.

Split times for the 20.57km Lough Gill test showed the 39-year-old Finn was more than six seconds quicker than his closest rivals at the final timing point, but Grönholm lost control of the car under braking for a corner and crashed heavily into a stone wall. Both driver and co-driver were taken to hospital by ambulance for precautionary checks but have now been released with the all-clear.

Hirvonen was fourth through all three stages to return to service in Sligo in third position, 27.1sec behind leader Sébastien Loeb. "The final 10km of the last stage were as slippery as ice, with mud on top of the shiny asphalt. The other stages were tricky with surprises, but not as bad as I thought they might be. I could have pushed harder on all three tests but my pace was OK and I'm happy with things so far," said the 27-year-old Finn.

Abu Dhabi driver Khalid Al Qassimi and Nicky Beech lie 28th in another BP-Ford-entered Focus RS. "It is incredibly slippery and tricky because there is so much mud on the road from previous cars cutting corners," said Al Qassimi. "On the first stage I slide wide into a ditch which was full of muddy water. I've seen a lot of drivers off the road already so a careful start is right for us."