



Hirvonen steers clear of trouble as Irish roads take their toll

BP-Ford World Rally Team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen ended today's dramatic opening leg of Rally Ireland in fourth place. The Finns adopted a risk-free policy in their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car in treacherously slippery conditions to preserve the team's momentum in its quest for a second consecutive manufacturers' title in the FIA World Rally Championship.

Team-mates Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen were one of many pairings to be caught out by the slimy roads and they crashed their Focus RS heavily this morning into a stone wall. Both were taken to hospital as a precaution for a check-up but were quickly released without injury. The huge impact damaged their car's roll cage and they will be unable to restart tomorrow under SuperRally regulations for safety reasons.

Huge expectation awaited the rally's debut in the championship as the penultimate round of the 16-event series. It got away to a spectacular start with last night's short speed test in front of the spectacular backdrop of Northern Ireland's Parliament buildings at Stormont in Belfast. The action switched across the border to the Republic of Ireland this morning as competitors left the rally base in Sligo for nine more asphalt special stages, covering 166.25km through the lush green countryside.

The narrow, bumpy lanes were full of crests and dips and presented the kind of challenge not found on any other championship round. The already damp and shiny asphalt was made even more slippery by cars dragging mud onto the roads. Many drivers stated they had never experienced such greasy conditions, comparing them to driving on ice.

Hirvonen was in no mood to take risks and the 27-year-old Finn completed the opening loop in third. He dropped a place when those stages were repeated and consolidated fourth place on the final loop over new roads this afternoon.

"That was the hardest day of the whole season so far," he said. "When you decide to play safe, sometimes you can be too safe and it's easy to lose too much time. I couldn't find a good rhythm because I'm driving to be safe and making small mistakes. I think I chose the wrong tyres for each loop but it's so hard here to know what the best option is. This morning I chose dry weather rubber with cuts. This afternoon I picked intermediates with cuts and dry weather rubber would have been better because the roads were only damp.

"The final 10km of the last stage this morning were like ice. The other stages were tricky with surprises, but not as bad as I thought they might be. I could have pushed harder but my pace was OK. When we repeated those tests there was a huge amount of gravel and mud on the roads and I didn't drive flat out. I just tried to find a good rhythm rather than chasing those ahead," he said.

Grönholm held third after three stages. Split times for the next test showed the 39-year-old Finn was more than six seconds quicker than his closest rivals at the final timing point, but he lost control of the car under braking and crashed into retirement.





"The accident happened near the finish on a wide, right corner," said Grönholm. "I braked for the bend but it was extremely slippery and the car skated off the road. I managed to turn it sideways before hitting a stone wall hard. It was a big, big impact because the car stopped immediately. Both wheels on my side of the car were pulled off. We were taken to hospital where we were both given a scan but that showed no problems. My neck is sore but otherwise I'm OK. It will be hard to lift the drivers' championship if Sébastien Loeb wins this weekend, but there are a lot of kilometres remaining here and on the final round in Great Britain so I'm not giving up yet."

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Nicky Beech are 25th in another Focus RS after a day spent learning the characteristics of the roads. "This was a tough day. Even the local drivers are saying how difficult it is. I was encouraged by my pace in the dry and I felt confident enough to push harder in those conditions. However, this is only the first day and I must remember there are two more long legs to go," said Al Qassimi.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson said: "I always thought the drivers' title would be decided in Great Britain and this will be the case. I hope Mikko can score the three points here to secure the manufacturers' title for us. That will allow him to drive flat out in Britain to try to help Marcus in his fight for the drivers' title. There are two long difficult days ahead here and with rain forecast tomorrow a lot could yet happen."

News from our Rivals

Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) won five stages to lead team-mate Dani Sordo, winner of four tests, by 11.2sec. Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) belied his inexperience on asphalt to hold third, 24.8sec ahead of Hirvonen. Petter Solberg (Subaru) is fifth, despite a morning misfire caused by a faulty sensor, while the privately-entered Guy Wilks (Subaru) is sixth. Henning Solberg (Ford) retired from sixth after crashing on stage 8 while Xevi Pons (Subaru) retired with engine damage after leaving the road 5km from the start of stage 4. Local hope Kris Meeke (Subaru) crashed out of the top 10 this afternoon and Chris Atkinson (Subaru) dropped 20 minutes after hitting a bank on a slippery right hand bend in stage 4.

Tomorrow's Route

The second leg moves across the border into Northern Ireland for two loops of identical stages on narrow farm roads around the Fermanagh lakelands. After leaving Sligo at 06.30, drivers tackle six tests covering 118.36km before returning to the town for the final overnight halt at 18.17.

Leaderboard after Leg 1

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	1hr 33min 15.9sec
2. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	1hr 33min 27.1sec
3. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 34min 44.3sec
4. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 35min 09.1sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	1hr 35min 35.1sec
6. G Wilks/P Pugh	GB	Subaru Impreza	1hr 37min 29.5sec
7. M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	1hr 37min 57.8sec
8. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	1hr 40min 01.3sec
9. T McNulty/E O'Donnell	IRL	Subaru Impreza	1hr 41min 11.8sec
10 G MacHale/P Nagle	IRL	Ford Focus RS	1hr 41min 15.7sec





Stage Times

Stage 1: 1. Grönholm 1min 30.8sec; 2. Loeb + 0.9; 3. Meeke + 1.0; 4. Atkinson + 1.2; 5. P Solberg + 1.4; **6= Hirvonen, Latvala + 1.7; 18. Al Qassimi + 7.4.**

Stage 2: 1. Loeb 6min 05.7sec; 2. Sordo + 3.0; **3. Grönholm + 6.0; 4. Hirvonen + 9.0;** 5. P Solberg + 17.3; 6. Atkinson + 18.9; **44. Al Qassimi + 1:15.6.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 7min 37.4sec; 2. Sordo + 4.0; **3. Grönholm + 5.1; 4. Hirvonen + 9.8;** 5. P Solberg + 17.8; 6. Atkinson + 19.2; **40. Al Qassimi + 1:22.1.**

Stage 3: 1. Sordo 15min 44.0sec; **2. Grönholm + 2.4;** 3. Loeb + 3.5; 4. Hirvonen + **12.8;** 5. Latvala + 16.8; 6. Atkinson + 20.6; **34. Al Qassimi + 2:12.9.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 23min 24.9sec; 2. Sordo + 0.5; **3. Grönholm + 4.0; 4. Hirvonen + 19.1;** 5. Latvala + 34.8; 6. Atkinson + 36.3; **36. Al Qassimi + 3:31.5.**

Stage 4: 1. Sordo 10min 54.7sec; 2. Loeb + 2.7; 3. Latvala + 8.5; **4. Hirvonen + 10.7;** 5. P Solberg + 14.8; 6. H Solberg + 21.6; **7= Al Qassimi + 35.9.**

Overall: 1. Sordo 34min 20.1sec; 2. Loeb + 2.2; **3. Hirvonen + 29.3;** 4. Latvala + 42.8; 5. P Solberg + 1:00.9; 6. H Solberg + 1:14.3; **33. Al Qassimi + 4:06.9.**

Stage 5: 1. Loeb 6min 22.0sec; 2. Sordo + 6.6; 3. Latvala + 10.0; **4. Hirvonen + 11.9;** 5. H Solberg + 13.5; 6. Mikkelsen + 20.1; **46. Al Qassimi + 1:19.3.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 40min 44.3sec; 2. Sordo + 4.4; **3. Hirvonen + 39.0;** 4. Latvala + 50.6; 5. P Solberg + 1:19.0; 6. H Solberg + 1:25.6; **37. Al Qassimi + 5:24.0.**

Stage 6: 1. Loeb 16min 09.6sec; 2. Sordo + 3.9; 3. Latvala + 5.1; 4. P Solberg + 18.3; **5. Hirvonen + 21.2;** 6. Wilks + 22.4; **36. Al Qassimi + 2:14.0.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 56min 53.9sec; 2. Sordo + 8.3; 3. Latvala + 55.7; **4. Hirvonen + 1:00.2;** 5. P Solberg + 1:37.3; 6. H Solberg + 1:48.7; **33. Al Qassimi + 7:38.0.**

Stage 7: 1. Sordo 10min 55.5sec; 2. Loeb + 1.5; **3. Hirvonen + 13.1;** 4. P Solberg + 15.5; 5. Latvala + 17.4; 6. H Solberg + 21.2; **15. Al Qassimi + 1:03.7.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 07min 50.9sec; 2. Sordo + 6.8; 3. Latvala + 1:11.6; **4. Hirvonen + 1:11.8;** 5. P Solberg + 1:51.3; 6. H Solberg + 2:08.4; **28. Al Qassimi + 8:40.2.**

Stage 8: 1. Loeb 11min 56.0sec; 2. Latvala + 2.0; 3. Sordo + 3.6; 4. P Solberg + 5.8; **5. Hirvonen + 14.0;** 6. Atkinson + 32.5; **30. Al Qassimi + 1:42.7.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 19min 46.9sec; 2. Sordo + 10.4; 3. Latvala + 1:13.6; **4. Hirvonen + 1:25.8;** 5. P Solberg + 1:57.1; 6. Wilks + 3:21.7; **27. Al Qassimi + 10:22.9.**

Stage 9: 1. Sordo 8min 21.3sec; 2. Loeb + 7.4; 3. Latvala + 15.0; 4. P Solberg + 17.3; **5. Hirvonen + 19.4;** 6. Atkinson + 30.5; **25. Al Qassimi + 1:33.5.**

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 28min 15.6sec; 2. Sordo + 3.0; 3. Latvala + 1:21.2; **4. Hirvonen + 1:37.8;** 5. P Solberg + 2:07.0; 6. Wilks + 3:52.2; **26. Al Qassimi + 11:49.0.**



Stage 10: 1. Loeb 5min 00.3sec; 2. Latvala + 7.2; 3. Sordo + 8.2; 4. P Solberg + 12.2; 5. Hirvonen + 15.4; 6. Atkinson + 16.9; 23. Al Qassimi + 58.1.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 33min 15.9sec; 2. Sordo + 11.2; 3. Latvala + 1:28.4; 4. Hirvonen + 1:53.2; 5. P Solberg + 2:19.2; 6. Wilks + 4.13.6; 25. Al Qassimi + 12:47.1.

