

Rally GB – after stage 3, Rheola 1

Large crowds packed Cardiff last night to view the start ceremony for this 16th and final round of the FIA World Rally Championship. The action switched 65km west this morning to Swansea, the base for the single service park and the hub of the rally during the next three days. Competitors left there this morning for the first of two identical loops of long speed tests high in the Vale of Neath forests.

Conditions were mild but slippery, the rain over the last few days having made the gravel tracks very muddy. Both Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen and BP-Ford World Rally Team colleagues Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen opted for BFGoodrich's extra soft compound tyres on their Focus RS World Rally Cars, with extra cuts carved into the rubber to help clear the mud.

The opening 17.41km Port Talbot test in Margam Forest was shrouded in thick fog. However, that failed to trouble Hirvonen too much as the 27-year-old Finn sped to fastest time by 6.5sec. He was then quickest through the 25.08km Resolfen and rounded off a perfect morning with a hat-trick of stage wins in the 27.91km Rheola. He returned to the Swansea service with a 21.4sec lead.

"I couldn't see anything in the first stage, it was like driving blind," he said. "It was tricky and there were some surprising places but my pace notes were perfect and I trusted them 100 per cent. I guess I've taken more risks than the others and I'm confident with the car and tyres. With that feeling it seems as though I can do almost anything I want. I need to be easier in braking when we repeat those stages this afternoon because it will be so slippery and the last stage in the dark will be hard also."

Grönholm, making his 150th WRC start on his final rally before retirement, returned to service in second behind his team-mate. The Finn's hopes of a third world title depend on the fortunes of arch-rival Sébastien Loeb, and Grönholm made a cautious start in the foggy Port Talbot test with third fastest. He was second in Resolfen and third in Rheola, to move ahead of the Frenchman by 1.0sec.

"I was too cautious at the start of the first stage because it was uncomfortable in the fog and I couldn't see much," said the 39-year-old Finn. "I don't have to take risks and I'm not driving flat out. I'm not trying to catch Mikko, just trying to control my pace. It's the first time I have reached first service for a few rallies and it feels good!"

Leaderboard after stage 3 of 17

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	38min 01.5sec
2. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	38min 22.9sec
3. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	38min 23.9sec
4. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	38min 30.9sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	38min 55.9sec
6. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	39min 01.4sec
7. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	39min 18.7sec
8. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	39min 38.8sec
9. M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	39min 44.8sec
10 X Pons/X Amigo	E	Subaru Impreza	39min 56.7sec