

Hirvonen stars on opening leg of Rally GB as Ford holds 1-2

BP-Ford World Rally Team dominated today's opening leg of Rally GB to hold first and second with its Focus RS World Rally Cars. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen were outstanding in dreadful weather conditions to win five of the day's six speed tests in south Wales and build a 39.6sec lead. Team-mates Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen shared fastest time on the other special stage to end the day in second.

After last night's start ceremony in Cardiff, the action on this final round of the FIA World Rally Championship moved west to Swansea this morning. It was from here that competitors left for two identical loops of three speed tests covering 140.80km high in the Vale of Neath forests. Rain over the last few days left the gravel tracks muddy and both Hirvonen and Grönholm opted for BFGoodrich's extra soft compound tyres on their Focus RS 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, although the weather improved for the remaining two tests of the opening loop in Resolfen and Rheola. However, heavy rain this afternoon caused the conditions to deteriorate and the final stage in Rheola – held in the dark, in torrential rain and thick fog – was evil, forcing drivers to little more than walking pace on the highest parts of the test.

Hirvonen was a fast starter this morning and quickest time on the opening three tests allowed him to build a 21.4sec lead. He was beaten into third on the middle stage of the afternoon loop but quickest time on the other two stages enabled the 27-year-old Finn to extend that advantage into a comfortable overnight lead.

"I couldn't see more than a handful of metres on the final stage, it was the worst I can remember," he said. "It was like having a white wall in front of the car and in some sections it was easier to drive with no lights at all. Driving in the dark, the fog and the rain was scary. I tried to drive through the conditions. My pace notes were perfect all day and I trusted them 100 per cent. I've not taken split times for the other drivers because there was enough work to do keeping the car on the road.

"I guess I took more risks than the others and I felt confident with the car and tyres. That allowed me to keep pushing and build my lead. Tomorrow I will try to maintain it, but I've not driven those stages for a few years so it won't be easy," he added.

Grönholm, making his 150th WRC start on his final rally before retirement, was focused more on the battle for the drivers' title in the championship. The 39-year-old Finn's hopes of a third crown depend on the fortunes of arch-rival Sébastien Loeb, and he made a cautious start in the fog. However, he quickly climbed to second and remained there this afternoon to end the day ahead of the Frenchman.

"I was too cautious at the start of the first stage this morning because it was uncomfortable in the fog and I couldn't see much," he said. "I don't have to take risks and I didn't drive flat out. I didn't try to catch Mikko, I was just trying to control my pace, but my confidence wasn't so good because the weather this afternoon was some of the worst I can remember in my career. There was water on the car, under the car and all around the car – there was even water in the car!"

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson described his drivers' performances as 'perfect'. "They couldn't have done better. This was exactly what I expected of Mikko. He has a good lead and Marcus is in the ideal position if anything happens to Loeb over the next two days," he added.

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Behind the BP-Ford duo, Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) drove cautiously with the world title on his mind, but the Frenchman had problems on the final test when his fog lights didn't work and he drove part of the test with no lights at all. Petter Solberg (Subaru) lies fourth despite a big spin early in the first stage and a broken shock absorber on the final test. Dani Sordo (Citroen) and Matthew Wilson (Ford) completed the top six. Henning Solberg (Ford) had a torrid day. The Norwegian dropped a minute with a first stage puncture and a broken heater matrix this afternoon caused his demister to fail and he drove all three stages with a fogged up windscreen. After dropping over 12min on the final stage, he opted to retire and restart tomorrow under SuperRally rules. Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) was fourth until a broken windscreen wiper on the final test cost more than 16min and he too retired. Sebastian Lindholm (Suzuki) retired with brake problems after the second stage.

Tomorrow's Route

The second leg is located further north, close to the Epynt military land. After leaving Swansea at 08.00, drivers face two identical loops of tests, split by a return to the city for service. The day ends with a spectacular test at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium, where the arena's sliding roof will be closed. Competitors arrive back in Swansea for the overnight halt at 20.55 after 104.48km of competition.

Leg 1 leaderboard

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1h 17m 21.3sec
2. M Gronholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	+39.6sec
3. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	+57.9sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	+1m34.0sec
5. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	+2m37.9sec
6. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	+5m01.3sec
7. C Atkinson/S Prevot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	+5m02.3sec
8. M Stohl/I Minor	AUT	Citroen Xsara	+5m37.9sec
9. X Pons/X Amigo	E	Subaru Impreza	+5m57.5sec
10. A Mikkelsen/O Floene	N	Ford Focus RS	+6m41.8sec