

## Rally GB – after stage 9, Halfway 1

Just five of the original 108 competitors failed to restart from Swansea this morning for the second day of this final round of the FIA World Rally Championship. Of the 103 starters, 21 are competing under SupeRally regulations having retired in yesterday's dreadful weather. The survivors face two identical loops of three speed tests near the Epynt military land before a spectacular end to the day with a special stage inside Cardiff's Millennium Stadium – a total of 104.48km.

Conditions were much improved from yesterday. Strong winds kept the fog away but temperatures were just 3°C as the cars began the opening test. However, as the morning progressed the skies turned darker and heavy showers ensured the gravel forest tracks remained muddy and slippery.

Overnight leaders Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen have not driven today's stages since 2004 so the BP-Ford World Rally Team driver was lacking in experience. However, the 27-year-old Finn was fourth fastest on the opening 19.56km Crychan test in his Ford Focus RS World Rally Car before setting second quickest time in the following 13.76km Epynt. He ended the morning with second through the 18.37km Halfway to return to service with his overnight 39.6sec lead reduced to 32.6sec.

"I've not been on these roads for several years and I was too careful up to the midpoint of the first stage. Halfway was difficult because there were many hairpins and tight junctions and my handbrake wasn't working properly. I'm driving at a pace I'm happy with but if Marcus decides to push, I may not be able to hold him. Conditions are easier and I've found a good rhythm today," he explained.

BP-Ford team-mates Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen, competing on their 150th and final WRC event, also made a cautious start in their Focus RS. Second overnight, the Finns have no reason to push as their hopes of landing a third drivers' world title depend as much on the fortunes of arch-rival Sébastien Loeb as their own. The 39-year-old Finn was second in Crychan and Epynt and third in Halfway to extend his advantage over Loeb from 18.3sec to 33.9sec.

"There's no stress and no pressure as I can do nothing but wait and see what happens to Loeb," he said. "Today and tomorrow are long days but I'm not enjoying driving at a steady pace. There's no plan to push to catch Mikko. It would be stupid for me to do that and make a mistake. My plan is to stay in second. It would be good to win my final rally but that's not my priority – the title is."

### Leaderboard after SS9

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1h 46m 12.4sec
2. M Gronholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	+32.6sec
3. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	+1m06.5sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	+2m13.3sec
5. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	+2m45.2sec
6. C Atkinson/S Prevot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	+5m28.3sec
7. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	+5m31.4sec
8. M Stohl/I Minor	AUT	Citroen Xsara	+6m23.0sec
9. X Pons/X Amigo	E	Subaru Impreza	+7m18.8sec
10. J Kopecky/F Schovanek	CZ	Skoda Fabia	+8m37.1sec