

Hirvonen continues to set hot pace for BP-Ford in Rally GB

Newly-crowned FIA World Rally champions* BP-Ford continued to dominate the top of the leaderboard during today's second leg of Rally GB. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen returned to Swansea with a 35.5sec advantage over team-mates Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen after a second day's competition in the rain-soaked forests of south Wales. Both pairings are at the wheel of a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car.

Hirvonen lacked experience on today's speed tests over military land north of the rally base in Cardiff, having not driven them since 2004. However, the 27-year-old Finn maintained his comfortable advantage over Grönholm, whose thoughts are focused more on trying to secure his third drivers' world title on this 16th and final round of the championship than winning the rally outright.

Today's route took competitors north from the Swansea service park to a tightly-clustered group of speed tests around the Epynt military ranges. Drivers tackled two identical loops of three special stages there, before the now traditional super special stage inside Cardiff's Millennium Stadium in front of a crowd of more than 26,500. The seven tests covered 104.48km.

Conditions were much improved from yesterday. Strong winds kept the fog away but temperatures were just 3°C as the action began this morning. However, as the day progressed the skies turned darker and cloudbursts ensured the gravel forest tracks remained muddy and slippery. BFGoodrich's extra soft compound tyres were the choice of both Hirvonen and Grönholm throughout the day.

Hirvonen made a cautious start and after the first loop Grönholm had reduced the overnight 39.6sec gap to 32.6sec. Grönholm cut the deficit back further during the afternoon tests, before 27-year-old Hirvonen reclaimed a few seconds when his 39-year-old team-mate suffered handling difficulties on the final forest stage.

"It was certainly easier driving than yesterday," said 27-year-old Hirvonen. "Although we had some rain the visibility was better and I could see where I was going. That's two days down and one to go, and I'm still at the front so I'm not complaining about the conditions too much. I was too cautious on the first stage this morning and Marcus took some time back so I pushed as hard as I could after that. On the middle stage this afternoon I went straight on at a slippery asphalt junction but that made me even more determined.

"It will be good to wake up in the morning in the lead, but I'm not taking anything for granted. Marcus might want to give me one last lesson before he retires so I will have to stay alert and keep the pace high to keep him behind me," he added.

Grönholm's title hopes depend on arch-rival Sébastien Loeb hitting trouble so the BP-Ford driver took no risks. His only problem came on the final forest stage when his car began to oversteer. "I don't know what happened but the right corner was oversteering and the car was like a snake. I didn't hit anything and then on the motorway to the final stage in Cardiff it was OK again. It was a mystery," he explained. However, he put that behind him to speed to an emotional stage win in the super-charged atmosphere at the stadium on his 150th and final rally before retirement.

"There was no stress and no pressure today as I can do nothing but wait and see what happens to Loeb. 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. It was great to win in the Millennium Stadium, though. There was a fantastic atmosphere and I really appreciated the ovation the fans gave me at the end of the stage," he added.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson reflected on another successful day. "Neither of them can do any more. They have done everything we asked them to do and it was a copybook performance from both of them," he said.

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Behind the BP-Ford duo, Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) took no risks in third, with his mind concentrated on the fight for the drivers' world title. Petter Solberg (Subaru) spun on the first stage and dropped 30sec but retained fourth ahead of Dani Sordo (Citroen). The closest battle was between Chris Atkinson (Subaru) and Matthew Wilson (Ford) for sixth. Atkinson, seventh overnight, moved ahead on the opening stage and the pair fought for every second during the rest of the day until the Australian opened a small gap to end the day 10.0sec ahead. The star performer was Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) who restarted under SuperRally rules this morning and was fastest on all six forest stages. Xevi Pons (Subaru) lost almost a minute with rear suspension problems this morning while Andreas Mikkelsen (Ford) rolled on stage 9 and retired.

Tomorrow's Route

The final leg promises to provide a real sting in the tail. After leaving Swansea at 06.25, drivers face two identical loops of two stages to the north-west in Brechfa Forest, split by service back in the city. The tests are the longest of the rally and competitors face 114.26km of competition. Notoriously slippery, the Brechfa roads are also characterised by long bends which can stretch for several hundred metres. The finish is in Cardiff at 15.10.

Leg 2 Leaderboard

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2h 16m 27.3sec
2. M Gronholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	+35.5sec
3. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	+1m15.0sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	+2m26.3sec
5. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	+2m56.9sec
6. C Atkinson/S Prevot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	+5m49.9sec
7. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	+5m59.9sec
8. M Stohl/I Minor	AUT	Citroen Xsara	+6m55.4sec
9. X Pons/X Amigo	E	Subaru Impreza	+7m46.4sec
10. M Ostberg/O Unnerud	N	Subaru Impreza	+9m28.6sec