

World champions BP-Ford end season with 1-2 in Rally GB

FIA World Rally champions* BP-Ford ended the 2007 campaign in perfect style by claiming first and second on Rally GB in Wales today. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen led from start to finish to score their third victory of the season in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car. Team-mates Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen were second in another Focus RS on their 150th and final WRC start before retirement.

It was the eighth victory of the season for BP-Ford World Rally Team, which clinched its second consecutive manufacturers' world title on the previous round in Ireland last month, and Ford's first 1-2 finish in GB since 1979. The 212 points scored in the manufacturers' series is the highest in Ford's WRC history.

During the 16 rallies spanning five continents on surfaces as diverse as snow, dry asphalt and rough gravel, the Focus RS has been a model of reliability. On a championship acknowledged as the toughest for production-based cars, the team has not suffered a single retirement due to mechanical problems after more than 5600km of flat-out competition.

This 16th and final round of the series was characterised by awful weather. Torrential rain and thick fog on Friday's opening leg reduced drivers to first gear in places as the visibility dropped to just a handful of metres. Although the fog disappeared, heavy rain continued throughout the second and third legs to leave the gravel forest roads in south Wales in treacherous condition. Drivers covered a total of 17 speed tests covering 359.54km.

Hirvonen took the lead on Friday's opening stage and built a comfortable advantage as Grönholm and arch-rival Sébastien Loeb concentrated on a tactical battle for the drivers' title. The 27-year-old Finn preserved his lead throughout the three-day event, despite going off the road on the final special stage this afternoon, to win by 15.2sec. He finished third in the drivers' championship.

"To finish the season with a victory is the best possible preparation for 2008," he said. "For me to stand on the podium with Sébastien Loeb, winner of four world titles, and Marcus Grönholm, one of the sport's greatest-ever drivers, at the end of such a fantastic season is perfect. It was Marcus' final rally but I wasn't tempted to give him the win. I know him well and he would not have wanted it that way. To finish the year with three wins is so much more than I thought at the start of the season.

"I made things exciting on the final stage when I went off the road and nearly got stuck in a ditch. I'm glad we made it through the weekend in really difficult conditions and I'm pleased for the team that we could end the season with a superb result like this," added Hirvonen.

Grönholm's thoughts were concentrated on a third drivers' world title but to achieve that he was reliant on Loeb encountering problems. So the 39-year-old Finn drove at a pace that put him in a position to capitalise on any troubles for the Frenchman, but one that was also risk-free. He settled into second on the opening morning and remained there throughout. Grönholm won the super special stage inside Cardiff's Millennium Stadium last night in front of a 26,500 crowd and was given a standing ovation there by fans in recognition of an outstanding career that brought two drivers' titles and 30 WRC wins.

"We were both very emotional at the end of the final stage," said Grönholm, who was runner-up in the drivers' championship. "To end my career in a team like this is a wonderful feeling. I've enjoyed two years at Ford with almost no problems and had a great car to drive. Although I'm disappointed that I couldn't win the championship, it was clear before I started this rally that it would be difficult.

"This was an incredibly hard weekend. Driving in fog, rain and darkness at the same time was so difficult and as I'm newly-retired, I'm so happy that I don't have to drive in those conditions any more! I did all I could but it wasn't here that I missed out on the title, it was when I crashed on the previous round in Ireland," he added.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson was delighted with his team's end to the season. "Mikko and Marcus could not have done any better. We've won every gravel event since May and to end the year with a 1-2 finish is a perfect result. Mikko drove a great rally but sadly Marcus didn't win the drivers' championship on his final event. It was a great season for the sport with a thrilling battle for the drivers' title that went down to the final round."

Ford TeamRS director Jost Capito celebrated his final rally in charge of the team. "It's fantastic to end a season in which Ford has again won the manufacturers' world title with a double podium. I'm sorry Marcus and Timo couldn't finish their career with a third world title, but it's great that Mikko and Jarmo are proving themselves ready to challenge for top honours next year. The targets set for our four-year programme with the new-generation Ford Focus have been achieved in just three years, and that's the ideal way to hand over my responsibilities and take on new challenges in the company."

The world's first mud message, spelling out 'WE DID IT!' in letters replicating the tyre tracks from BP-Ford's Focus RS was created alongside yesterday's Halfway stage to celebrate the team's manufacturers' title. The message was written in letters made of mud, 10m tall and stretching across 65m of hillside, to thank those that were involved in this year's success. To mark Grönholm's retirement, BP Ultimate and Ford teamed up to create a sea of Marcuses, by handing out 5,000 specially-made Grönholm face masks to fans during the event.

News from our Rivals

Third place was sufficient for Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) to claim his fourth successive drivers' title, equalling the winning record of Juha Kankkunen and Tommi Mäkinen. Behind the BP-Ford duo, team-mates Petter Solberg and Chris Atkinson (Subaru) finished fourth and seventh respectively to assure their team of third in the manufacturers' series. Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) won every stage again today, giving him a 100 per cent win record on the final two legs over the forest tests.

Final Leaderboard

1. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3h 22m 50.9sec
2. M Gronholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	+15.2sec
3. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	+1m33.0sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	+2m57.3sec
5. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	+3m14.3sec
6. M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	+7m32.9sec
7. C Atkinson/S Prevot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	+8m29.5sec
8. M Stohl/I Minor	AUT	Citroen Xsara	+8m54.6sec
9. X Pons/X Amigo	E	Subaru Impreza	+9m48.8sec
10. J M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	+10m42.4sec

Drivers

1. S Loeb	116pts
2. M Grönholm	112pts
3. M Hirvonen	99pts
4. D Sordo	65pts
5. P Solberg	47pts
6. H Solberg	34pts

Manufacturers

1. BP-Ford (champion)	212pts
2. Citroen Total	183pts
3. Subaru	87pts
4. Stobart VK M-Sport Ford	81pts
5. OMV Kronos Citroen	45pts
6. Munchi's Ford	14pts

* Subject to the official publication of the results by the FIA

Stage Times

Stage 14: 1. Hirvonen, Latvala 16min 14.2sec; 3. Grönholm + 2.0; 4. Sordo + 11.8; 5. Loeb + 14.9; 6. P Solberg + 15.3.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 2hr 32min 41.5sec; 2. Grönholm + 37.5; 3. Loeb + 1:29.9; 4. P Solberg + 2:41.6; 5. Sordo + 3:08.7; 6. Wilson + 6:21.9.

Stage 15: 1. Latvala 16min 39.7sec; 2. Grönholm + 2.2; 3. Hirvonen + 7.6; 4. Loeb + 11.2; 5. Sordo + 17.1; 6. H Solberg + 21.1.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 2hr 49min 28.8sec; 2. Grönholm + 32.1; 3. Loeb + 1:33.5; 4. P Solberg + 3:00.9; 5. Sordo + 3:18.2; 6. Wilson + 6:53.7.

Stage 16: 1. Latvala 16min 11.6sec; 2. Grönholm + 1.4; 3. P Solberg + 3.0; 4. Hirvonen + 3.7; 5. Sordo + 7.4; 6. Loeb + 8.0.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 3hr 05min 44.1sec; 2. Grönholm + 29.8; 3. Loeb + 1:37.8; 4. P Solberg + 3:00.2; 5. Sordo + 3:21.9; 6. Wilson + 7:12.4.

Stage 17: 1. Latvala 16min 51.0sec; 2. Grönholm + 1.2; 3. Sordo + 8.2; 4. Loeb + 11.0; 5. P Solberg + 12.9; 6. H Solberg + 15.0.

Overall: 1. Hirvonen 3hr 22min 50.9sec; 2. Grönholm + 15.2; 3. Loeb + 1:33.0; 4. P Solberg + 2:57.3; 5. Sordo + 3:14.3; 6. Wilson + 7:32.9.