

For immediate release: 8 February 2008

Six of the best for Latvala as Ford takes charge of Swedish Rally

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team dominated the opening day of the Swedish Rally to hold first and second tonight. Finns Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila produced a stellar performance to win all six of the traditional forest speed tests in their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car and build an overnight lead of 48.2sec. Team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Miikka Anttila were second as Focus RS cars filled the top four positions on this second round of the FIA World Rally Championship.

Latvala, just 22 years old and competing on only his second rally for the BP Ford Abu Dhabi squad, made the most of a perfect start position this morning which gave him the best of the road conditions in the forests of central Sweden. But his pace was just as rapid over the same special stages this afternoon, when conditions were more even, and he doubled his advantage over Hirvonen.

Labelled the only pure winter rally in the series and a safe bet to produce a Scandinavian winner, this year's Swedish Rally is far from normal. Temperatures several degrees above freezing ensured there is barely a flake of snow in the rally base at Karlstad. Further north in western Värmland, where today's action was based, the roads were initially snow-covered but were lacking the usual ice base beneath. Once the cars swept away the snow on this morning's first run, their studded tyres ripped into the soft gravel surface to leave mud and standing water as the major hazard this afternoon.

Latvala was second fastest over the spectacular super special stage at Karlstad's trotting track last night before beginning his amazing winning run on the country stages today. Starting 10th in the running order this morning, the soft snow was swept clear by the early starters to leave him with better grip. He ended the leg with fourth on a second pass over the trotting track test tonight to hold a comfortable lead after eight of the rally's 20 stages, covering 122.14km.

"It's an amazing feeling," he said. "I had a good road position and knew I would benefit but I've also felt really confident with the Focus. I enjoyed some good times last year but this is right up there as being one of the best days in my rallying career. It's a surprise to be leading by so much and the afternoon went better than I expected. I've learned how to drive in these difficult conditions.

"I had a few tricky moments this morning when I was too sideways and my heart was beating hard, but this afternoon I had to keep the car in the ruts like a train on a track. Conditions weren't easy for me this morning so they must have been much more difficult for the first starters," he added.

Hirvonen suffered this morning from being second in the start order, but the 27-year-old Finn moved into second and remained there throughout the day. He is 8.1sec ahead of the privately-entered Focus RS of Henning Solberg.

"Jari-Matti has driven superbly and I'm not surprised he is leading, but I am surprised at the gap between us," said Hirvonen. "Of course, I would like to win but I'm not going to take any risks or make stupid mistakes in chasing him. I've not enjoyed a clear driving line all day. This morning I had the snow, and this afternoon I was first in the start order over roads on which the driving line was changed by cars further down the order on the first pass. Conditions were tricky with slush, water and gravel this afternoon. I even had mud on my windscreen and that's strange on a winter rally!

"Pirelli's tyres worked well and despite the conditions, stud retention wasn't a problem. I just tried to keep the car in the ruts and drive steadily. I'm glad the day is behind me and looking forward to tomorrow when conditions should be more even for all the front-runners," he added.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr are 12th in another officially-entered Focus RS. "It's my first ever winter rally so I'm driving cautiously," said 35-year-old Al Qassimi. "Ironically for a snow event, my biggest problem has been mud coming onto my windscreen and obscuring the view. For some, driving in these conditions is like driving in the desert for me, but it's all new to me here."

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson described Latvala's performance as 'sensational'. "It has been a magnificent day for the team and who cannot fail to be impressed by Jari-Matti? He was outstanding. Mikko has also done a stunning job. He's thinking about the drivers' championship and with Sébastien Loeb retiring, he is pacing himself. I'm expecting both to drive sensibly over the next two days to try to hold their positions with a view to gaining maximum points for Ford," he said.

News from our Rivals

Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) was the closest challenger to the Ford duo until the Frenchman rolled near the end of stage four. He damaged his car's clutch and although he reached the following remote service zone, the team was unable to make repairs and he retired on the following liaison section. Henning Solberg and Gigi Galli (both Ford) are third and fourth after troublefree days. Petter Solberg (Subaru) also had no problems to hold fifth while fellow Norwegian Mads Østberg (Subaru) is sixth, despite losing 30sec this morning with a spin. Chris Atkinson (Subaru) dropped 15 minutes after sliding off into a snow bank on stage three while Per-Gunnar Andersson retired on stage four with engine troubles. Dani Sordo (Citroen) lies 18th after starting with a five-minute penalty after the team changed the engine in his car following Rallye Monte Carlo.

Tomorrow's Route

The second day is located further east with the action clustered around the town of Hagfors, which will host a remote service zone midway through the day's competition. Drivers depart Karlstad at 06.50 and face two identical loops of three stages before returning to the city for the overnight halt at 18.50.

Leaderboard after Day 1

1. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 03min 33.3sec
2. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 04min 21.5sec
3. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 04min 29.6sec
4. G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	1hr 04min 35.3sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	1hr 05min 18.5sec
6. M Østberg/O Unnerud	NOR	Subaru Impreza	1hr 05min 48.4sec
7. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 06min 32.9sec
8. T Gardemeister/T Tuominen	FIN	Suzuki SX4	1hr 06min 54.9sec
9. A Mikkelsen/O Floene	NOR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 07min 39.1sec
10 P Sandell/E Axelsson	SWE	Peugeot 207	1hr 08min 47.9sec

Stage Times

Stage 1: 1. P Solberg 1min 28.9sec; **2. Latvala + 0.5;** **3. Hirvonen + 0.9;** 4. Loeb + 1.1; 5. H Solberg + 1.5; 6. Galli + 2.0.

Stage 2: **1. Latvala 7min 24.0sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 3.3;** 3. Østberg + 4.3; 4. Loeb + 6.7; 5. H Solberg + 7.0; 6. Galli + 8.2.

Overall: **1. Latvala 8min 53.4sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 3.7;** 3. Loeb + 7.3; 4. Østberg + 7.9; 5. H Solberg + 8.0; 6. Galli + 9.7.

Stage 3: **1. Latvala 10min 33.7sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 1.9;** 3. Loeb + 4.6; 4. H Solberg + 7.9; 5. Galli + 13.9; 6. P Solberg + 19.3.

Overall: **1. Latvala 19min 27.1sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 5.6;** 3. Loeb + 11.9; 4. H Solberg + 15.9; 5. Galli + 23.6; 6. P Solberg + 30.5.

Stage 4: **1. Latvala 12min 20.7sec;** 2. H Solberg + 16.4; **3. Hirvonen + 17.4;** 4. Galli + 24.7; 5. P Solberg + 31.2; 6. Wilson + 34.1.

Overall: **1. Latvala 31min 47.8sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 23.0;** 3. H Solberg + 32.3; 4. Galli + 48.3; 5. P Solberg + 1:01.7; 6. Gardemeister + 1:23.3.

Stage 5: **1. Latvala 7min 22.3sec;** 2. Galli + 4.2; 3. H Solberg + 4.4; **4. Hirvonen + 6.1;** 5. Østberg + 7.2; 6. Sordo + 9.2.

Overall: **1. Latvala 39min 10.1sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 29.1;** 3. H Solberg + 36.7; 4. Galli + 52.5; 5. P Solberg + 1:11.8; 6. Østberg + 1:43.0.

Stage 6: **1. Latvala 10min 32.4sec;** 2. H Solberg + 7.5; 3. Galli + 7.6; **4. Hirvonen + 8.0;** 5. P Solberg + 15.6; 6. Sordo + 17.0.

Overall: **1. Latvala 49min 42.5sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 37.1;** 3. H Solberg + 44.2; 4. Galli + 1:00.1; 5. P Solberg + 1:27.4; 6. Østberg + 2:02.6.

Stage 7: **1. Latvala 12min 21.2sec;** 2. Galli + 3.3; 3. Sordo + 7.1; 4. Østberg + 9.5; **5. Hirvonen + 10.9;** 6. P Solberg + 12.3.

Overall: **1. Latvala 1hr 02min 03.7sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 48.0;** 3. H Solberg + 56.5; 4. Galli + 1:03.4; 5. P Solberg + 1:45.6; 6. Østberg + 2:12.1.

Stage 8: 1. Galli 1min 28.2sec; 2. P Solberg + 1.0; 3. H Solberg + 1.2; **4. Latvala + 1.4;** **5. Hirvonen + 1.6;** 6. Atkinson + 2.1.

Overall: **1. Latvala 1hr 03min 33.3sec;** **2. Hirvonen + 48.2;** 3. H Solberg + 56.3; 4. Galli + 1:02.0; 5. P Solberg + 1:45.2; 6. Østberg + 2:15.1.

For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Baskerville on the **BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team** media desk in Karlstad Tel: + 46 54 186974. Images available on www.worldrallypics.com/ford