

Rally d'Italia Sardegna – after stage 3, Terranova

The exclusive holiday resort of Porto Cervo, perched on Sardinia's shimmering Costa Smeralda coastline, hosted last night's start ceremony for this sixth round of the FIA World Rally Championship. The action switched down the coast to the rally base in Olbia this morning as 57 starters left under overcast skies for the opening loop of three gravel speed tests covering 65.78km south of the town.

As championship leader BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen are first in the start order today in their Focus RS World Rally Car. Conditions were slippery but Hirvonen was unsure whether that was due to heavy rain earlier this week or loose gravel on the surface. He was eighth on the opening 16.43km Monte Corvos test after an overshoot but bounced back to set third quickest time in the following 33.96km Crastazza. Sixth in the 15.39km Terranova meant the 27-year-old Finn returned to the Olbia service park tied for third place.

"It was slippery and I couldn't push any harder," he said. "At times I was driving from ditch to ditch and in places I eased off because I didn't want to go off the road. I'm not sure if I was losing time because I was cleaning the loose gravel, or because I was breaking the damp surface and the cars behind had better grip. This afternoon the roads will be rutted so I hope to find more grip and speed."

Team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila made a blistering start by posting fastest time by 7.0sec through Monte Corvos in their Focus RS. However, the 23-year-old Finnish driver was caught out by the narrow tracks on the following 33.96km Crastazza test and punctured the rear left tyre after sliding wide and swiping a bank. He dropped more than 90sec and slipped to 14th. However, second fastest time in Terranova, despite briefly stalling the engine, enabled Latvala to climb to 11th.

"It was my mistake," said Latvala. "Maybe my pace notes were too quick, but at a downhill right bend about 18km after the start I hit a soft bank and the tyre came away from the rim and went down straight away. Because it was a rear tyre I decided not to stop and change it because I would lose too much time and that proved the right decision. Now my target is to regain more places this afternoon."

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr lie 14th in another Focus RS. "The first stage was wet and I had a couple of spins where the car completely stopped. I've had no major problems though and I'm more confident that I can find pace in this rally now," said Al Qassimi.

Leaderboard after stage 3 of 20

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|-----------|------------------------------|------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. | S Loeb/D Elena | FRA | Citroen C4 | 46min 16.5sec |
| 2. | D Sordo/M Marti | ESP | Citroen C4 | 46min 39.0sec |
| 3= | M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen | FIN | Ford Focus RS | 46min 55.3sec |
| 3= | C Atkinson/S Prévot | AUS | Subaru Impreza | 46min 55.3sec |
| 5. | P Solberg/P Mills | NOR | Subaru Impreza | 47min 00.8sec |
| 6. | U Aava/K Sikk | EST | Citroen C4 | 47min 28.0sec |
| 7. | G Galli/G Bernacchini | ITA | Ford Focus RS | 47min 33.1sec |
| 8. | T Gardemeister/T Tuominen | FIN | Suzuki SX4 | 47min 35.9sec |
| 9. | H Solberg/C Menkerud | NOR | Ford Focus RS | 47min 38.4sec |
| 10 | P-G Andersson/J Andersson | SWE | Suzuki SX4 | 47min 51.4sec |