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Latvala and Hirvonen geared up for last leg showdown in Jordan

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team goes into tomorrow's final day of the Jordan Rally perfectly poised to challenge for victory on this fifth round of the FIA World Rally Championship. Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila lie second in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car with team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen in third, just 1.9sec behind their fellow Finns. Both are within striking distance of leader Dani Sordo as only 10.4sec cover the leading trio.

Tactics played a key part during today's closing kilometres, played out at the lowest point on earth on the shores of the Dead Sea, more than 400 metres below sea level. Going into the final speed test, Latvala led Hirvonen by 4.6sec with Sordo another 6.5sec behind. Those standings would have placed the BP Ford Abu Dhabi duo in the first two start positions for the final leg, forcing them to sweep slippery loose gravel from the hard-packed roads and give Sordo a cleaner and faster line behind.

With Sordo in that unenviable position today, the team was able to monitor the Spaniard's pace and transmit his stage time to the cars of Latvala and Hirvonen behind. Both drivers then elected to ease their pace before the finish of the test to ensure they dropped behind Sordo on the leaderboard and earn a more advantageous road position for tomorrow.

Drivers today tackled two identical loops of four gravel stages, covering 109.84km, south-west of Amman. Temperatures again hovered around 35°C, although intermittent cloud cover offered some relief for drivers and fans enjoying the Easter holiday here.

Twenty-three-year-old Latvala started the day in third and posted three second fastest times over the four tests to climb to second and close in on Sordo. He took the lead on the opening stage this afternoon and remained there until tactics came into play on the final test. "We had a pre-event team strategy not to be first on the road tomorrow so I slowed before the finish," he said. "I believe it's the right tactic but it was a strange feeling having to slow the car down. I pushed as hard as possible until then. It will be a hard day tomorrow but I need to sleep well and attack hard. When I wake up tomorrow, I want to win this rally so I need to be both careful and very fast.

"I made quite a few mistakes this morning and couldn't find my confidence. I couldn't respond to Sébastien Loeb's speed. I slid wide too often and also ended in a field after a crest on stage 11 because my pace note was wrong. Luckily I didn't damage the car. This afternoon I felt more comfortable and my performance improved," he added.

Hirvonen, fourth last night, climbed to third this morning. The 27-year-old followed Latvala passed Sordo to take second when he was fastest on this afternoon's opening stage, before he too played his tactical card. "With lots of loose gravel on the road surface of tomorrow's stages, my plan was to ensure I didn't start the final day first," he said. "Things were made easier for us when Loeb retired. He set incredible times at the front and it seemed as though our plan might not work as he was building a big lead but he had an accident and now things look good.

"I'm sure I'll have to fight all day tomorrow. Sordo will be fast on the second pass of the stages when the roads are cleaner, even if he loses time on the first pass, and Jari-Matti will be tough to beat. I made no mistakes but when I tried to push hard it was difficult to gain time. I couldn't believe it when I saw Loeb's accident. It was on a very narrow section of road just after a crest," added Hirvonen.

Abu Dhabi's Khalid Al Qassimi and Michael Orr climbed to ninth in another Focus RS. "I started well this morning and had good pace. But at the end of a long straight in stage 10 I hit the brakes, nothing happened and I banked the car. Thankfully there wasn't much damage and I put the car into neutral, got out and completed the stage. My confidence was a bit low after that but I was able to build it back up again," said Al Qassimi.

BP Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson explained the team's tactics. "We monitored Dani Sordo's split times and gave our drivers his final stage time. It was down to the drivers to implement the team strategy that we discussed before the event and that strategy was to run second and third on the road for the final day," he said.

News from our Rivals

Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) stormed into a 34sec lead after winning the first three stages. But he was sidelined following a head-on collision with Conrad Rautenbach's (Citroen) car on a narrow two-way access road leading to and from stage 11. Nobody was injured but both retired. Dani Sordo (Citroen) regained the lead but was relegated by Latvala and Hirvonen before the final stage tactics. His only problem was a slow rear right puncture in stage 13. Seven Focus RS cars fill the top 10 with Stobart's Matthew Wilson and Henning Solberg and Munchi's Federico Villagra in points positions. Gigi Galli won the final three stages as he recovered to 10th after yesterday's retirement. Petter Solberg (Subaru), competing under SupeRally rules, retired for the second day after going off the road on the final stage.

Tomorrow's Route

Unusually, the final day is the longest of the rally and includes a sting in the tail. After a 06.45 restart, drivers tackle two identical loops of three speed tests west of Amman covering 134.24km, split by a mid-morning return to the Dead Sea service park. The final test of each loop is the monster 41.45km Jordan River, one of the longest of the season, which winds alongside the river bed next to Jordan's border with Israel's West Bank. The finish is on the shores of the Dead Sea at 15.00.

Leaderboard after Day 2

1. D Sordo/M Marti	ESP	Citroen C4	2hr 29min 02.9sec
2. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 29min 11.4sec
3. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	2hr 29min 13.3sec
4. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	2hr 31min 05.4sec
5. U Aava/K Sikk	EST	Citroen C4	2hr 32min 10.1sec
6. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	2hr 33min 59.4sec
7. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	2hr 34min 13.8sec
8. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	2hr 35min 59.2sec
9. K Al Qassimi/M Orr	UAE	Ford Focus RS	2hr 36min 13.4sec
10 G Galli/G Bernacchini	ITA	Ford Focus RS	2hr 40min 32.6sec

Stage Times

Stage 9: 1. Loeb 8min 18.1sec; **2. Latvala + 5.1**; **3. Hirvonen + 8.0**; 4. Sordo + 9.2; 5. P Solberg + 11.2; 6. Galli + 20.4; **11. Al Qassimi + 36.0**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 25min 12.9sec; 2. Sordo + 8.1; **3. Latvala + 12.5**; **4. Hirvonen + 20.3**; 5. Atkinson + 1:32.1; 6. Aava + 2:59.1; **10. Al Qassimi + 4:39.3**.

Stage 10: 1. Loeb 8min 40.9sec; **2. Hirvonen + 6.7**; 3. Sordo + 8.2; **4. Latvala + 10.7**; 5. Galli + 12.0; 6. P Solberg + 13.9; **13. Al Qassimi + 45.3**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 33min 53.8sec; 2. Sordo + 16.3; **3. Latvala + 23.2**; **4. Hirvonen + 27.0**; 5. Atkinson + 1:51.0; 6. Aava + 2:38.8; **10. Al Qassimi + 5:24.6**.

Stage 11: 1. Loeb 11min 54.9sec; **2. Latvala + 11.3**; **3. Hirvonen + 11.4**; 4. Sordo + 17.8; 5. Galli + 19.6; 6. Aava + 23.2; **11. Al Qassimi + 46.2**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 1hr 45min 48.7sec; 2. Sordo + 34.1; **3. Latvala + 34.5**; **4. Hirvonen + 38.4**; 5. Atkinson + 2:14.8; 6. Aava + 3:02.0; **10. Al Qassimi + 6:10.8**.

Stage 12: 1. Sordo 6min 42.2sec; **2. Latvala + 0.3**; **3. Hirvonen + 1.7**; 4. Galli + 5.2; 5. Aava + 10.8; 6. Atkinson + 12.0; **8. Al Qassimi + 17.3**.

Overall: 1. Sordo 1hr 53min 05.0sec; **2. Latvala + 0.7**; **3. Hirvonen + 6.0**; 4. Atkinson + 1:52.7; 5. Aava + 2:38.7; 6. Wilson + 4:07.7; **9. Al Qassimi + 5:54.0**.

Stage 13: **1. Hirvonen 8min 15.7sec**; **2. Latvala + 1.8**; 3. Sordo + 6.4; 4. P Solberg + 7.4; 5. Galli + 9.1; 6. Atkinson + 10.5; **11. Al Qassimi + 27.2**.

Overall: **1. Latvala 2hr 01min 23.2sec**; **2. Hirvonen + 3.5**; 3. Sordo + 3.9; 4. Atkinson + 2:00.7; 5. Aava + 2:51.2; 6. Wilson + 4:31.1; **9. Al Qassimi + 6:18.7**.

Stage 14: 1. Galli 8min 40.8sec; **2. Hirvonen + 1.5**; **3. Latvala + 3.0**; 4. P Solberg + 5.4; 5. Sordo + 5.5; 6. H Solberg + 7.3; **11. Al Qassimi + 24.2**.

Overall: **1. Latvala 2hr 10min 07.0sec**; **2. Hirvonen + 2.0**; 3. Sordo + 6.4; 4. Atkinson + 2:07.0; 5. Aava + 2:59.0; 6. Wilson + 4:44.8; **9. Al Qassimi + 6:39.9**.

Stage 15: 1. Galli 11min 57.8sec; **2. Latvala + 2.9**; 3. Atkinson + 4.9; **4. Hirvonen + 5.5**; 5. Sordo + 7.6; 6. Andersson + 11.9; **10. Al Qassimi + 29.1**.

Overall: **1. Latvala 2hr 22min 07.7sec**; **2. Hirvonen + 4.6**; 3. Sordo + 11.1; 4. Atkinson + 2:09.0; 5. Aava + 3:13.3; 6. Wilson + 5:01.3; **9. Al Qassimi + 7:06.1**.

Stage 16: 1. Galli 6min 41.2sec; 2. Sordo + 2.9; 3. H Solberg + 7.2; 4. Atkinson + 7.5; 5. Aava + 7.9; 6. Wilson + 9.2; **9. Al Qassimi + 18.4**; **10. Hirvonen + 19.8**; **11. Latvala + 22.5**.

Overall: 1. Sordo 2hr 29min 02.9sec; **2. Latvala + 8.5**; **3. Hirvonen + 10.4**; 4. Atkinson + 2:02.5; 5. Aava + 3:07.2; 6. Wilson + 4:56.5; **9. Al Qassimi + 7:10.5**.

For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Baskerville on the **BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team** media desk at Dead Sea Tel: + 962 5 3560 083. Images available on www.worldrallypics.com/ford