

Latvala turns heat onto rivals to lead Rally Mexico for Ford

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila produced a performance as blistering as the Mexican weather to lead throughout the opening day of Rally Mexico today. Twenty-two-year-old Latvala, who became the youngest driver in history to win a round of the FIA World Rally Championship earlier this month, led from the opening kilometre in his Ford Focus RS World Rally Car to build a 9.6sec overnight advantage.

Team-mates and drivers' championship leaders Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen lie fifth in another Focus RS after the first of three days of tough gravel speed tests east of León, high in the hills of central Mexico. The Finns had the worst of the slippery road conditions this morning and a puncture this afternoon cost 40sec as they ended the day 1min 10.6sec behind their fellow countrymen.

Huge crowds packed the narrow streets of Guanajuato last night for the spectacular start ceremony of this third round of the championship and opening gravel event of the year. Music and dancing groups entertained the spectators before the 39 starters threaded their way through tens of thousands of fans as they made their way from this beautiful city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to the rally's León base.

The action began in earnest today as competitors tackled two identical loops of three speed tests, before two passes over a super special stage at León's race circuit – a total of 135.74km of competition. The rally is the highest of the season, today's action climbing to 2737m on hillsides awash with cacti and only briefly dipping below 2000m. The altitude took its toll on cars as the thinner air caused engines to 'run out of breath' and lose more than 25 per cent of their usual power.

The region has been blessed by dry and hot weather for some time, leaving a coating of loose stones on the surface of the gravel tracks above the city. Hirvonen and Latvala were the first two cars in the start order and as a result they endured the worst of the slippery conditions on the opening loop, sweeping the stones away to leave a cleaner and faster driving line for those behind.

However, it failed to slow Latvala who stamped his authority on the event by winning the opening special stage. He completed the opening loop with a 4.4sec lead over Sébastien Loeb, before two more stage wins on cleaner roads this afternoon extended his advantage over the world champion.

"I started with plenty of confidence after Sweden and felt relaxed," he said. "It's a big surprise for me to lead because my pre-event target was to look for a podium. It's more than I expected or dreamed about. I kept a good pace all day and the whole package has worked well – car, driver, co-driver and tyres. I had some big impacts on stones this morning but Pirelli's tyres stood up well.

"It will be interesting to be first in the start order tomorrow on the gravelly roads, but I was second today and there's not such a big difference. I don't want to think about it too much, I just want to get into the car and see what happens. The plan is to drive in the same way as I did on the slippery roads this morning. The stages are tricky so I need to find the same relaxed feeling," he said.

Hirvonen was fifth on all three morning tests to hold fourth, 18.7sec behind his team-mate. However, a slow puncture on this afternoon's middle stage cost 40sec and one place.

"I don't know what I hit but I slid wide in a couple of corners towards some stones so maybe that was the cause," he said. "There was a crack in the wheel rim and slowly the tyre lost air before coming off the rim completely with about 3km to go. It was a slow puncture so I decided not to stop to change it and drove for about 15km like that. It was the right decision.

"It's annoying when your young team-mate is beating you, and it wasn't the car or my road position that was the reason why Jari-Matti is so far ahead of me. He's driven very well. The time gap between myself and Loeb is what I expected but the difference to Jari-Matti is far more than I thought. I need to find more speed tomorrow. This morning's conditions were as I expected. It was difficult in the braking areas and the loose gravel meant there was no traction accelerating out of the bends," he said.

News from our Rivals

After pre-event dramas yesterday when Sébastien Loeb's (Citroen) engine was changed before later being reinstalled, the Frenchman emerged as Latvala's closest challenger. He won three stages and is 12.8sec ahead of Chris Atkinson (Subaru), whose only concerns were a launch control difficulty this morning and a faulty intercom this afternoon. Team-mate Petter Solberg dropped 40sec this morning with brake problems but won two stages to lie fourth, 8.7sec ahead of Hirvonen. Henning Solberg (Ford) is sixth, despite hitting a rock on the second stage and bending his car's rear left suspension. He lost almost two minutes. Gigi Galli (Ford) slid into a ditch on stage three and dropped 90sec when lying fourth, before the Stobart driver retired on the next stage after hitting a rock and breaking a steering arm. He will not restart due to a damaged roll cage. Dani Sordo (Citroen) retired on the opening test with broken front left suspension after hitting a rock. Toni Gardemeister (Suzuki) lost more than 18min after limping through the morning with intermittent throttle response, before retiring in stage four with an engine problem. Team-mate Per-Gunnar Andersson retired from sixth in the mid-leg service with a similar problem and neither will restart tomorrow.

Tomorrow's Route

The second day follows a similar format with two identical loops of three stages north and east of León, split by service back in the city. The day ends with two more tests at the city's super special stage. After a 07.30 start, competitors face 157.32km of competition before the 18.01 finish.

Leaderboard after Day 1

1. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 23min 38.6sec
2. S Loeb/D Elena	FRA	Citroen C4	1hr 23min 48.2sec
3. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	1hr 24min 01.0sec
4. P Solberg/P Mills	NOR	Subaru Impreza	1hr 24min 40.5sec
5. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	1hr 24min 49.2sec
6. H Solberg/C Menkerud	NOR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 26min 22.2sec
7. M Wilson/S Martin	GBR	Ford Focus RS	1hr 26min 31.5sec
8. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	ARG	Ford Focus RS	1hr 29min 08.6sec
9. R Trivino/C Salom	MEX	Peugeot 206	1hr 31min 57.2sec
10 S Ogier/J Ingrassia	FRA	Citroen C2	1hr 32min 51.6sec