



Grönholm wins Rally New Zealand after close battle

Hamilton (New Zealand), September 2nd 2007 - BP-Ford World Rally Team drivers Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen won Rally New Zealand today after a titanic battle with arch rival Sébastien Loeb produced the closest finish in the history of the FIA World Rally Championship. The ice-cool Finns withstood immense pressure inside their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car to win this 11th round of the series by just 0,3 sec after more than 350 km of blistering driving – a margin which equates to 7,5 metres or less than two car lengths!

It was 39-year-old Grönholm's fifth victory of the season and also his fifth in New Zealand, making him the most successful driver in the event's history. It extended his lead in the drivers' championship to 10 points. Team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen finished third in another Focus RS to seal BP-Ford's seventh double podium of the season and extend the reigning champion's lead in the manufacturers' series to 46 points.

New Zealand's North Island roads provide some of the best rallying territory in the world. The smooth and flowing gravel speed tests wound their way through lush, green countryside close to the Tasman Sea coastline, west of Hamilton. Muddy roads during the opening leg contrasted with dry and dusty conditions throughout the second day and damp tracks today to provide a tricky tyre choice throughout the three-day event.

The margin between Grönholm and Loeb never rose above 15 sec and the duo started the final leg with the Frenchman ahead by 1,7 sec. After overnight storms the roads dried quickly but were still damp and Grönholm opted for BFGoodrich's soft compound rubber throughout the day's seven special stages covering 95,94 km.

He moved ahead on the opening stage but Loeb retaliated to lead by 0,5 sec after the next test. He extended that to 2.9sec before the BP-Ford driver edged ahead with three consecutive stage wins, culminating in a thrilling performance through the classic Whaanga Coast test, one of the most spectacular in the championship. Grönholm started the final 3,14 km test with a 0,7 sec lead, enough to claim his 30th career win.

"It was an incredible fight all weekend and this win is fantastic for my championship hopes," said Grönholm. "It's the closest and best battle in my career and I'm delighted to have won it. There wasn't room for a single missed gearchange. I'm really happy for the team, more so because everyone was able to stand outside and watch the final stage near the service park and share in our excitement when we knew we had done it."



"I stayed calm in the rally car and that's something I've learned from many years' practice of attacking. The only big stress came with choosing tyres because the conditions were inconsistent and when it's as close as it has been here, then one wrong tyre choice would have ruined everything. It's good to extend my championship lead and I think it's going to be a great end to the season," he added.

Hirvonen held third from Friday's opening stage. With no pressure from behind and no opportunity to join the fierce battle ahead, the 27-year-old Finn took no risks to settle for his sixth consecutive podium and ninth of the season. "I made one wrong tyre choice on Friday and I was out of the battle," he said. "I'm not upset with third and I've enjoyed the weekend but I was a little unhappy with my driving and not being able to join Seb and Marcus in the fight for victory. But I feel like I've learned how to drive here and it was important for the team to get the points for third."

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson said the timing of the win was perfect considering the rallies remaining. "It's good psychologically for Marcus and has strengthened our position in both championships. It's outstanding for him to come from behind and win and I've never seen a finish like that in my career. When I saw Marcus jumping up and down on the roof of his car at the finish line I knew he had done it. Now I'm going to send him a bill for the dents to the roof!" he said.

Ford Team RS director Jost Capito was equally exhilarated by the outcome. "The drama and excitement we've seen over the weekend was a match for any of the world's great sporting events and demonstrates what a thrilling sport WRC is. My congratulations to Marcus and Timo who kept cool under the most extreme pressure," he said.

Final positions

1. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 52min 53.9sec
2. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	3hr 52min 54.2sec
3. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 54min36.7sec
4. C Atkinson/S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	3hr 55min 26.2sec
5. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 55min30.8sec
6. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	3hr 56min 35.9sec
7. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	3hr 56min 48.6sec
8. U Aava/K Sikk	EE	Mitsubishi Lancer	4hr 02min 10.2sec
9. H Solberg/C Menkerud	N	Ford Focus RS	4hr 02min48.5sec
10 M Wilson/M Orr	GB	Ford Focus RS	4hr 03min13.8sec



PRESS INFORMATION

Drivers

1. M Grönholm	90pts
2. S Loeb	80pts
3. M Hirvonen	69pts
4= P Solberg	31pts
4= D Sordo	31pts
6. H Solberg	28pts

Manufacturers

1. BP-Ford	159pts
2. Citroen Total	113pts
3. Subaru	60pts
4. Stobart VK M-Sport Ford	55pts
5. OMV Kronos Citroen	35pts
6. Munchi's Ford	6pts

Photographs are available on www.fordpress.be and www.worldrallypics.com/ford

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