



BP-Ford finishes first and second in Italy to top WRC standings

Sardegna, 20/05/2007 - BP-Ford World Rally Team lead both the manufacturers' and drivers' standings in the FIA World Rally Championship after finishing first and second on Rally d'Italia Sardegna today. Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen won this seventh round of the series in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car to retake the lead in the drivers' championship. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen were second in another Focus RS after three days of tough driving on the Mediterranean island.

The result stretched the reigning champion's advantage in the manufacturers' series to 21 points with one round remaining before the mid-season break. It was Grönholm's 27th WRC victory and he now lies second in the all-time standings. It was his first win on the Italian round of the championship and he leads the drivers' standings by seven points. Hirvonen remains third but is now just four points from second place.

Sardinia's gravel tracks are among the most demanding in the championship and drivers had to tackle 342.86km of them in the north of the island near to the rally base in Olbia. Narrow, covered in gravel during the first pass and rutted and rocky for following runs, they require strength and reliability from both the cars and BFGoodrich's tyres, as well as outright speed to be successful.

Grönholm led during the first leg until a damaged shock absorber dropped him to second. Then a bizarre incident on the second morning when his spare wheel was knocked out of the rear of the car forced him to drive cautiously for fear of puncturing. He began the final leg 36.5sec behind Sébastien Loeb but continued to pressurise the Frenchman, and when he crashed out Grönholm was able to pace himself to victory by 29.2sec.

"It's a great feeling to be back on top of the podium and the team deserves this result because everyone has been working so hard," said the 39-year-old Finn. "I had good speed on Friday but was unlucky. Fortunately we had our luck today when Seb crashed. I kept the pressure on him this morning and this is a big confidence boost for us in our championship fight. It's nice to see he does not drive like a machine all the time! It wasn't an easy win after difficulties on Friday and Saturday and there is still a long way to go, but it's nice to be leading the championship and not behind."

Hirvonen settled into third towards the end of the opening day and the 26-year-old was under no pressure from behind for the rest of the rally. He climbed to second when Loeb retired. "I aimed for a podium and that's what I achieved so I'm happy," he said. "There are areas where I can still improve but my times were closer to the pace of Marcus and Seb here so that's good progress.



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"We had ups and downs here but no problems with the Focus and I'd like to thank everyone in the team for its efforts. I've enjoyed this rally enormously. A 1-2 for Ford is excellent and we need to keep going like that for the rest of the season," he added.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson described his team's performance as 'superb'. "This is Ford's second 1-2 of the season (along with Rally Norway) and was richly deserved. Marcus outpaced Loeb on Friday until problems intervened but he never gave up and earned his reward today. Mikko was his usual consistent self and I'm pleased to see that he has stepped up his speed since the last rally. We're in a great position in both the manufacturers' and drivers' championships and we must concentrate on pressing home our advantage on future rallies," he said.

After Ford of Europe president and CEO John Fleming collected the manufacturers' trophy at the finish ceremony in Porto Cervo, Ford Team RS director Jost Capito said: "John Fleming is rapidly becoming our lucky omen. He came to Monte Carlo, Greece, Finland and Britain last year when we won. He attended in Norway in February when we won and now here. We are thinking of booking him up for the rest of the season!"

Final positions

1. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3h 48min 42.0sec
2. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3h 49min 11.2sec
3. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	3h 50min 03.8sec
4. H Solberg/C Menkerud	N	Ford Focus RS	3h 50min 18.6sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	3h 51min 16.2sec
6. T Gardemeister/J Honkanen	FIN	Mitsubishi Lancer	3h 53min 44.1sec
7. M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	3h 54min 10.6sec
8. J Hanninen/M Markkula	FIN	Mitsubishi Lancer	3h 58min 13.7sec
9. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	FIN	Ford Focus RS	4h 00min 09.7sec
10 C Atkinson/ S Prévot	AUS	Subaru Impreza	4h 05min 01.4sec

Drivers

1. M Grönholm	55pts
2. S Loeb	48pts
3. M Hirvonen	44pts
4. D Sordo	28pts
5= H Solberg	20pts
5= P Solberg	20pts

Manufacturers

1. BP-Ford	99pts
2. Citroen Total	78pts
3. Stobart VK M-Sport Ford	37pts
4. Subaru	34pts
5. OMV Kronos Citroen	25pts



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