



FORD FIESTA RS WRC: NICE RESULT IN SECOND RACE

- Ford Fiesta RS WRC 2nd and 3rd in Mexico after 1-2-3 win in Sweden
- Hirvonen leader in WRC drivers Championship
- Ford Abu Dhabi Team leader in WRC manufacturers championship
- Ford Fiesta S2000 1st and 3rd on opening round of SWRC

Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team claimed a double podium in Rally Mexico to extend its lead in both the manufacturers' and drivers' standings in the FIA World Rally Championship. Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen finished second in the gravel debut of the new Ford Fiesta RS World Rally Car, 45.5sec ahead of team-mates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila.

The result meant Ford Abu Dhabi extended its lead in the manufacturers' series to 26 points after the second round of the 13 event series. Hirvonen, winner of the opening round in Sweden last month, stretched his lead in the drivers' championship to nine points. He increased his Mexican tally after taking maximum bonus points by winning the final Power Stage. Latvala is third in the standings.

The opening dirt event of the season was punishing. Rocky roads in the Sierra de Lobos mountains near León, 400km north-west of Mexico City, combined with temperatures of 33°C to take a heavy toll on competitors. Few drivers escaped technical problems, but the Fiesta RS WRCs of Hirvonen and Latvala completed the four-day rally unscathed and a total of three punctures were their only troubles.

Competitors tackled 22 speed tests covering 364.97km over four days. The challenge was made even tougher by the altitude. The roads climbed to more than 2700 metres, and the thinner air deprived cars of up to 20 per cent of their normal power, requiring a different driving approach.

Hirvonen had the first leg disadvantage of opening the roads, sweeping a deep carpet of loose gravel from the tracks. It left a cleaner and faster line for those behind and he ended the day in third. The 30-year-old Finn consolidated his position yesterday and climbed to second this morning when Sébastien Ogier crashed out of the lead.

"It's a great result from the championship perspective, especially considering the disadvantage of our road position on Friday," he said. "After my difficulties last season, I feel I've rediscovered my consistency and that's so important in mounting a title challenge. I knew the roads used in the Power Stage well and those bonus points are a big boost.

"I didn't have the opportunity to fully test some of the parts on the Fiesta before this rally. So I'm looking forward to doing that when we test in Portugal before our next rally there. We still have work to do in improving the car, but it's a hugely encouraging start to the season," he added.

Latvala recovered well to take the final step on the podium after losing two minutes when he stopped to change a rear left puncture on the opening day. The time loss dropped him to ninth but he climbed back to fourth at the end of the leg. A second puncture yesterday proved less costly and the 25-year-old Finn had settled for fourth until he was promoted to third this morning.

"To take a podium after two punctures is more than I could hope for," he admitted. "Our pace improved as the rally progressed and the Fiesta RS WRC felt good all the way through the weekend. I used the same set-up all rally and I was happy with the handling for our first gravel rally in the car. But we can still make improvements, and that's my aim before the next round in Portugal.

Ford Abu Dhabi team director Malcolm Wilson described the result as a 'dream finish'. "We knew this weekend would be tough and to leave Mexico having increased our lead in both the manufacturers' and drivers' championships is perfect. The team learned much about the set-up of our cars. We'll use our next test to try to improve further ahead of the upcoming gravel rounds," he said.

Ford of Europe motorsport chief Gerard Quinn said: "Coming to Mexico off the back of victory in Sweden was difficult. It meant our cars were first in the start order, costing valuable time in the opening leg as we swept the stages for the following competitors. I'm delighted with the reliability and performance of the Fiesta RS WRCs and the fact that we lead both championships. We know our cars are competitive, but we still have work to do and I look forward to fighting for victory in Portugal."

News from other Ford teams & S2000

M-Sport Stobart Ford duo Mads Østberg and Jonas Andersson adopted a cautious policy today to claim sixth in their Fiesta RS WRC. Team-mates Henning Solberg and Ilka Minor took seventh, despite having to change their car's alternator belt on a liaison section after the opening stage. Munchi's Ford's Federico Villagra and Jorge Perez Companc finished 10th after limping through the final stage with a broken driveshaft. Monster World Rally Team's Ken Block and Alex Gelsomino were 13th after losing 20 minutes in the penultimate stage with an electrical problem.

Ford Fiesta S2000 cars claimed first and second in the opening round of the SWRC support category. Nasser Al-Attiyah and Giovanni Bernacchini led home Martin Prokop and Jan Tománek by 13.5sec.

WRC Mexico Final positions

1. S Loeb/D Elena	Citroen DS3	3hr 53min 17.0sec
2. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	Ford Fiesta RS	3hr 54min 55.4sec
3. J-M Latvala/M Anttila	Ford Fiesta RS	3hr 55min 40.9sec
4. P Solberg/C Patterson	Citroen DS3	4hr 00min 35.4sec
5. M Østberg/J Andersson	Ford Fiesta RS	4hr 02min 00.5sec
6. H Solberg/I Minor	Ford Fiesta RS	4hr 03min 07.0sec
7. M Prokop/J Tománek	Ford Fiesta S2000	4hr 06min 52.0sec
8. J Hanninen/M Markkula	Skoda Fabia S2000	4hr 08min 05.7sec
9. F Villagra/J Perez Companc	Ford Fiesta RS	4hr 41min 34.2sec

SWRC Mexico Final positions

1. Martin Prokop	Ford Fiesta S2000	4 hours 06 mins 52.0 sec
2. Juho Hanninen	Skoda Fabia S2000	4 hours 08 mins 05.7 sec
3. Ott Tanak	Ford Fiesta S2000	4 hours 46 mins 59.8 sec

WRC Drivers Championship

1. M Hirvonen	46pts
2. S Loeb	37pts
3. J-M Latvala	31pts
4. M Østberg	28pts
5. P Solberg	23pts
6. S Ogier	15pts

WRC Manufacturers Championship

1. Ford Abu Dhabi	73pts
2. Citroen Total	47pts
3. M-Sport Stobart Ford	36pts
4. Petter Solberg	12pts
5. Ice 1 Racing	8pts
6= Team Abu Dhabi	6pts
6= Munchi's Ford	6pts
6= Monster	6pts

Next round

The championship returns to Europe for round three later this month. The all-gravel Rally de Portugal is based in Faro on 24 - 27 March.

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For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Finney at the Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team media desk in León Tel: + 52 477 7111 948.

Images available at www.worldrallypics.com/ford

Video: <http://www.wrcfordlive.com/?a=videos>