



BP-Ford duo eases through first leg darkness of Monte Carlo

BP-Ford World Rally Team made a strong start to the Rallye Monte Carlo tonight as the legendary event signalled the start of the FIA World Rally Championship season. Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen lie third in a Focus RS World Rally Car with team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen fourth in a similar car after the opening leg held in darkness in central France.

To celebrate the 75th anniversary of the most famous rally in the 16-round championship, Rallye Monte Carlo moved its base north-west from the Principality of Monaco to the city of Valence. The region is home to many famous speed tests on which the rally built its reputation but which have been unused for 10 years.

Tonight's short, sharp leg took competitors east of Valence into the Vercors mountains for two asphalt special stages covering 46.40km. The area is usually blanketed in snow in mid-January but remarkably mild temperatures, which were up to 6°C tonight in the mountains, mean there is no snow or ice to be seen. With the forecast for even warmer temperatures over the weekend, this will be a pure asphalt rally with no call for the studded tyres that so often play a crucial role.

Both stages were held in darkness, the first time that an entire leg of a WRC rally has been held at night for more than 10 years and a new experience for many drivers. They were damp, with standing water in places on the second test, but the lack of winter weather meant they were lightning fast with average speeds topping 122kph on the first stage. Both BP-Ford drivers opted for BFGoodrich's soft compound tyres, Hirvonen adding small hand-carved cuts to match the rubber to the wet conditions.

Grönholm was third fastest through the 28.52km test from St Jean en Royans to Col de Lachau and second in the following 17.88km La Cime du Mas - Col de Gaudissart stage to hold third, just 5.2sec behind second-placed Dani Sordo.

"I made a cautious start," said the 38-year-old Finn. "I could have driven faster on the opening stage but I didn't have a good feeling, I didn't enjoy the dark. I was braking too early but I think I will feel happier in daylight tomorrow. When the road was damp, it was also shiny and that was hard. The set-up of the car was good and I'm not going to change that tonight"

Hirvonen was fifth on the opening test and fourth on the next to lie 22.6sec behind Grönholm. "I didn't enjoy the dark and I was too cautious," said the 26-year-old Finn. "Some sections of the road were wide but I turned into the bends too tight and could have gone wider and used the entire road. I was nervous at the start and I'm pleased tonight is over, although I'm happy with my position.



"I didn't really trust my pace notes in the dark but actually they were fine. It has been a long time since I have driven stages that fast. I'm sure it's exciting to drive in the dark on gravel and snow, but not so much on asphalt," he added.

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson was satisfied with the overnight results. "It would have been good to be closer to the two Citroens but I expected them to set the pace this evening," he said. "We knew Loeb would be quick and we saw strong performances on asphalt last year from Sordo. I'm sure Marcus and Mikko will be looking forward to the daylight stages tomorrow and I'm pleased we've had no problems tonight."

News from our Rivals

World champion Sébastien Loeb and Dani Sordo (Citroen) provided the perfect return to the WRC for the French manufacturer by holding the top two places. Loeb, driving his first rally since breaking his arm in a mountain bike accident in September, was fastest on both stages on the debut of the new C4 car to lead his colleague by 23.9sec. Behind the BP-Ford duo, Petter Solberg (Subaru) lies fifth ahead of team-mate Chris Atkinson, although the Norwegian struggled for traction in the slippery conditions. None of the top drivers encountered any major problems.

Tomorrow's Route

The second leg is the longest of the rally and covers a massive 150.62km of competition in the Ardèche region, south-west of Valence. After leaving the city at 06.50, drivers tackle two identical clockwise loops of three stages, split by a return to Valence for a lunchtime service. The opening test of each loop is a massive 46.02km, after which there is a brief 15 minute period of limited service in Vals les Bains. Competitors return to Valence for the overnight halt at 20.41.

Leaderboard after Leg 1

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	23min 29.9sec
2. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	23min 53.8sec
3. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	24min 21.6sec
4. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	N	Subaru Impreza	24min 27.5sec
5. P Solberg/P Mills	AUS	Subaru Impreza	24min 30.0sec
6. C Atkinson/G MacNeall	A	Citroen Xsara	24min 31.6sec
7. M Stohl/I Minor	FIN	Mitsubishi Lancer	24min 36.0sec
8. T Gardemeister/J Honkkanen	CZ	Skoda Fabia	24min 43.1sec
9. J Kopecky/F Schovanek	F	Peugeot 307	24min 59.0sec
10 J-M Cuoq/D Marty			

For



Stage Times

Stage 1: 1. Loeb 13min 58.7sec; 2. Sordo + 8.5; **3. Grönholm + 14.8**; 4. P Solberg + 24.0; **5. Hirvonen + 27.4**; 6. Kopecky + 30.8.

Stage 2: 1. Loeb 9min 31.2sec; **2. Grönholm + 14.3**; 3. Sordo + 15.4; 4. Atkinson + 24.0; **5. Hirvonen + 24.3**; 6. Stohl + 28.4.

Overall: 1. Loeb 23min 29.9sec; 2. Sordo + 23.9; **3. Grönholm + 29.1**; **4. Hirvonen + 51.7**; 5. P Solberg + 57.6; 6. Atkinson + 1:00.1.

For more information: Contact Mark Wilford or Georgina Baskerville on the **BP-Ford World Rally Team** media desk in Valence Tel: + 33 4 75 82 43 28
Photographs are available on www.worldrallypics.com/ford