



Grönholm heads to Monte Carlo with podium place on cards

BP-Ford World Rally Team drivers Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen ended the mountain speed tests of the Rallye Monte Carlo tonight in a comfortable podium position in their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car. The Finns were no under no pressure from behind and took no risks as they eased through the day to preserve third position on this opening round of the FIA World Rally Championship with a just a short test remaining on Monaco's Grand Prix circuit tomorrow morning.

In contrast, team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen fought furiously with Chris Atkinson. They go to Monaco tonight with the Focus RS pair in fourth, ahead by just 0.8sec with 2.80km of competition to decide the outcome. The Finns won three of the day's six speed tests in the Haute-Loire region of central France in a thrilling battle with the Australian that saw them swap positions on virtually every stage.

The third and final leg began in darkness this morning from the rally base in Valence. Competitors headed north-west of the city to tackle two identical loops of three special stages covering 128.72km. Conditions were again dry and sunny in the mountains, although drivers reported a 500m section of patchy ice this morning – the only winter weather encountered in an area normally blanketed by snow and ice at this time of year.

Grönholm had no realistic chance of catching the drivers ahead and was more than 1min 15sec clear of fourth-placed Atkinson at the restart. He posted two third fastest times and one second quickest in the opening loop. Despite his caution, Grönholm broke a wheel rim after clipping a bridge on the opening stage this afternoon but was able to continue unhindered.

"The feeling with the car was good but I didn't have to push because I'm under no pressure," said the 38-year-old Finn. "I just drove to finish the event. I couldn't catch the drivers ahead so there was no point in pushing like an idiot trying to do so. I have not had that much to do but still managed to hit a wall while crossing a bridge. I was lucky not to do much damage. The asphalt was dark and slippery as I approached the bridge and then 'bang', I hit the wall. Maybe I was driving a little too quickly at the time."

Hirvonen restarted in fifth in his BP Ultimate and Castrol-branded Focus RS, 17.2sec behind Atkinson. He slashed Atkinson's advantage to just 8.9sec on the opening loop, winning the final test. The battle raged even more on the second loop. Hirvonen won the first stage to move ahead by 0.4sec, Atkinson regained fourth by winning the next stage to move 7.2sec ahead and then Hirvonen won the final test to move back in front by just 0.8sec.

"That was a great day!" enthused Hirvonen. "It was brilliant fun to fight with Chris and tomorrow is going to be so exciting. It will be the first time that I have driven a super special stage at the end of a rally fighting for position and that's a fantastic way to end the event. Maybe I should call my friend Mika Hakkinen who lives in Monaco and ask him for some advice on how to drive the Grand Prix circuit! It's compulsory to use snow tyres so there will be plenty of sliding on the asphalt. I can't wait."

BP-Ford team director Malcolm Wilson said: "We have made the best of things to hold third and fourth tonight. Mikko has enjoyed a fantastic day. He is having a tremendous battle with Chris Atkinson that will be decided tomorrow. It will be a thrilling finale in front of the television cameras in the morning. What a great way to finish the rally!"



News from our Rivals

Leader Sébastien Loeb (Citroen) was quickest on the opening stage but the Frenchman could afford to pace himself through the rest of the day. He ended with a 31.1sec advantage over Spanish team-mate Dani Sordo, who was also untroubled. Behind the BP-Ford duo and Chris Atkinson (Subaru), Petter Solberg (Subaru) lies sixth, despite escaping with just damaged steering after slipping into a ditch at a sixth-gear kink on the second stage. Brother Henning (Ford) spun at the same point. After two days' battle, Jari-Matti Latvala (Ford) closed to within 5.4sec of Jan Kopecky (Skoda) in their duel for the final drivers' points' position, but Latvala hit a wall on the last stage and dropped more than two minutes as he slipped from ninth to 11th. However, on returning to service the damage to the side of the car was too great for him to continue and he retired.

Tomorrow's Route

The final action of this 75th Rallye Monte Carlo takes place in Monaco, the only part of the event that is held in its traditional home. After a free transit section to the Principality this evening, drivers tackle a 2.80km super special stage around the harbour area of the Grand Prix circuit. Two cars at a time will drive the test, starting on opposite sides of the swimming pool complex, and all competitors must use unstudded snow tyres. It starts at 09.00 with the field tackling the test in reverse order and the action will be broadcast live on Eurosport.

Leaderboard after Leg 3 (interim)

1. S Loeb/D Elena	F	Citroen C4	3hr 08min 36.2sec
2. D Sordo/M Marti	E	Citroen C4	3hr 09min 07.3sec
3. M Grönholm/T Rautiainen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 09min 59.8sec
4. M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen	FIN	Ford Focus RS	3hr 11min 04.8sec
5. C Atkinson/G MacNeall	AUS	Subaru Impreza	3hr 11min 05.6sec
6. P Solberg/P Mills	N	Subaru Impreza	3hr 11min 42.2sec
7. T Gardemeister/J Honkkanen	FIN	Mitsubishi Lancer	3hr 12min 14.5sec
8. J Kopecky/F Schovanek	CZ	Skoda Fabia	3hr 13min 12.6sec
9. J-M Cuoq/D Marty	F	Peugeot 307	3hr 14min 31.4sec
10 M Stohl/I Minor	A	Citroen Xsara	3hr 15min 11.9sec

Stage Times

Stage 9: 1. Loeb 10min 47.2sec; 2. Sordo + 1.1; **3. Grönholm + 10.1**; 4. P Solberg + 13.9; **5. Hirvonen + 14.9**; 6. Cuoq + 16.6.

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 08min 28.3sec; 2. Sordo + 26.3; **3. Grönholm + 1:25.8**; 4. Atkinson + 2:51.0; **5. Hirvonen + 3:02.4**; 6. Gardemeister + 3:12.9.

Stage 10: 1. Atkinson 12min 42.7sec; **2. Grönholm + 3.6**; 3. Latvala + 7.2; 4. Sordo + 7.3; 5= Cuoq, P Solberg + 7.7; **7. Hirvonen + 8.9**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 21min 26.2sec; 2. Sordo + 18.4; **3. Grönholm + 1:14.2**; 4. Atkinson + 2:35.8; **5. Hirvonen + 2:56.1**; 6. P Solberg + 3:12.0.



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Stage 11: 1. **Hirvonen 11min 46.9sec**; 2. Loeb + 1.2; 3. **Grönholm + 5.8**; 4. Kopecky + 8.0; 5. Latvala + 8.1; 6. Gardemeister + 8.8.

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 33min 14.3sec; 2. Sordo + 29.6; 3. **Grönholm + 1:18.8**; 4. Atkinson + 2:46.0; 5. **Hirvonen + 2:54.9**; 6. P Solberg + 3:20.5.

Stage 12: 1. **Hirvonen 10min 45.1sec**; 2. P Solberg + 0.8; 3. **Grönholm + 4.9**; 4= Kopecky, Loeb + 7.9; 6. Sordo + 8.2.

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 44min 07.3sec; 2. Sordo + 29.9; 3. **Grönholm + 1:15.8**; 4. **Hirvonen + 2:47.0**; 5. Atkinson + 2:47.4; 6. P Solberg + 3:13.4.

Stage 13: 1. Atkinson 12min 32.4sec; 2. Sordo + 2.1; 3. Latvala + 5.4; 4. P Solberg + 6.3; 5.

Hirvonen + 7.6; 6. Loeb + 8.8; 8. **Grönholm + 14.4**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 2hr 56min 48.5sec; 2. Sordo + 23.2; 3. **Grönholm + 1:21.4**; 4. Atkinson + 2:38.6; 5. **Hirvonen + 2:45.8**; 6. P Solberg + 3:10.9.

Stage 14: 1. **Hirvonen 11min 30.5sec**; 2. Atkinson + 8.0; 3. P Solberg + 12.3; 4. Loeb + 17.2; 5.

Gardesmeister + 18.7; 6. **Grönholm + 19.4**.

Overall: 1. Loeb 3hr 08min 36.2sec; 2. Sordo + 31.1; 3. **Grönholm + 1:23.6**; 4. **Hirvonen + 2:28.6**; 5. Atkinson + 2:29.4; 6. P Solberg + 3:06.0.

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