



New-look Rallye Monte Carlo offers tough season opener

Just 46 days after ending its 2006 FIA World Rally Championship winning season with victory in Britain, BP-Ford World Rally Team will launch its title defence on the Rallye Monte Carlo (18 - 21 January). Drivers Marcus Grönholm and Timo Rautiainen and teammates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen, who excelled as Ford claimed its first manufacturers' world title for 27 years, will again be behind the wheel of the Focus RS World Rally Car as the 16-round series gets under way.

In contrast to BP-Ford's continuity, there is little to recognise in Rallye Monte Carlo compared with last year. The oldest event in the calendar, celebrates its 75th anniversary and organisers have made big changes. A new base in Valence, north-west of its traditional home in Monaco, signals a return to legendary asphalt speed tests in the Ardèche and Vercors mountains unused for 10 years.

The inland special stages are away from the warming coastal influence experienced in the traditional tests in the Alps above Monaco, home to the event in recent years. Temperatures may dip lower at night and take longer to warm up in the day. Although recent weather has been mild, the forecast arrival of a cold snap next week may bring patchy snow and ice on the bleak and inhospitable higher sections of the rally.

Essentially an asphalt event on technically straight-forward roads, unpredictable weather can make Rallye Monte Carlo hugely difficult. Drivers can face bone dry roads, streaming wet asphalt and treacherous ice – always with the threat of snow on the highest ground. They can often encounter all on the same stage as the route climbs and descends mountain cols, switching from southern facing roads sheltered from the extreme weather to exposed northern ones.

The rally can be won or lost on a good or bad choice. Each group of stages can contain tests which offer vastly different conditions that must be tackled on rubber chosen more than three hours before the action begins. There is no perfect tyre choice for such weather and frequently the secret for success is selecting compromise rubber which loses least time in the 'wrong' conditions. Reliable weather data from team personnel in the mountains and accurate condition checks from safety crews, allowed to drive the stages before competitors, are the key to the right tyres.

This year's opening leg will be held entirely in the dark, another challenge on a rally already regarded as one of the most difficult of the season and certainly the most unpredictable. It is the first time an entire leg has been held in darkness for more than 10 years.

This will be the seventh start for Grönholm, who won last year on his debut for the team. However, the move away from Monaco means the roads will be new. "I drove some in 1991 as an ice crew driver but I can't remember a thing about them," said the 38-year-old Finn. "It will be dark on the first leg and that will be difficult, especially on stages I don't know. Then



on Friday there is a 46km stage in the morning to wake me up – one of the longest in the championship. It won't be easy.

"You can never drive flat out in Monte Carlo because road conditions are so unpredictable. I want to win but I'm not going to go crazy for victory. It's much better to finish second or third than risk everything pushing for a win in changing conditions. Tyres are always so important. The weather on the stages can change so quickly and can also be entirely different from that in the service park so it is important to have the best weather forecasts and the best information from our personnel in the stages," he added.

Hirvonen claimed his first Rallye Monte Carlo finish in three starts in 2006. "It's a massively difficult rally with which to start the season but I like it," he said. "It's the biggest challenge in the championship. I was seventh last year but I want to improve on that and then really get down to business on the snow in Sweden.

"I know nothing of the stages. They will be totally new to me but that will be the same for everyone. We have to be careful with the pace notes. We need to be precise with them for the two dark stages on Thursday and concentration will be crucial. Tyre selection will also be vital. When temperatures drop close to 0C it's hard to see if there is black ice. That's when we rely heavily on our safety crew for accurate information," he added.

Team News

- * The Focus RS cars will sport a new livery for the 2007 season. In addition to the new colour scheme, BP-Ford also has a new logo for 2007.
- * The team is in the middle of a four-day pre-event test in the south of France. Hirvonen started yesterday (Thursday) and Grönholm will take over for the final two days tomorrow (Saturday).
- * Grönholm and Rautiainen will drive a Focus RS WRC on the Galway International Rally in Ireland on 2 - 4 February. Based in Galway City in west Ireland, it is the opening round of the Irish Tarmac Championship and covers 245km of asphalt special stages over two days. The event will give the Finns valuable experience of Irish roads ahead of Rally Ireland's WRC debut in November.

Rally Route

The route has been completely revised and only the final morning will be spent in its traditional Monaco base. Instead Valence will host the service park around which the bulk of the action is based. Thursday evening's opening leg is in darkness throughout and heads into the Vercors mountains east of the city. On Friday the action moves south-west of Valence into the Ardèche for the longest leg of the event, which includes two passes over the massive 46km St Pierreville - Antraigues. Saturday's competition is located north-west of the city in the Haute - Loire region. A free transit section then takes competitors to Monaco in the



evening before a short super special stage around the harbour area of the Principality's Grand Prix circuit brings the competition to a close on Sunday morning. There are 15 stages covering 328.54km in a route of 1185.02km.

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

RALLYE MONTE-CARLO

ROUND 1 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP 18 – 21 January 2007

Thursday 18 January: Leg 1 Valence - Valence

Start	Valence		18.00
SS1	St Jean en Royans - Col de Lachau	28.52km	19.16
SS2	La Cime du Mas - Col de Gaudissart	17.88km	20.06
Serv A	Valence (45 mins)		21.34
Finish	Valence		22.19
Total		46.40km	

Friday 19 January: Leg 2 Valence - Valence

Serv B	Valence (10 mins)		06.50
SS3	St Pierreville - Antraigues	46.02km	08.19
RSZ	Vals Les Bains (15 mins)		09.25
SS4	Burzet - Lachamp Raphael	16.48km	10.13
SS5	St Martial - Le Chambon - Beleac	12.81km	10.59
Serv C	Valence (30 mins)		13.28
SS6	St Pierreville - Antraigues	46.02km	15.17
RSZ	Vals Les Bains (15 mins)		16.23
SS7	Burzet - Lachamp Raphael	16.48km	17.11
SS8	St Martial - Le Chambon - Beleac	12.81km	17.57
Serv D	Valence (45 mins)		19.56
Finish	Valence		20.41
Total		150.62km	



Saturday 20 January: Leg 3 Valence - Monaco

Serv E	Valence (10 mins)		06.00
SS9	Labatie d'Andaure - Lalouvesc	19.67km	07.31
SS10	St Bonnet - St Bonnet	25.93km	08.13
SS11	Lamastre - St Barthelemy Grozon	18.76km	09.38
Serv F	Valence (30 mins)		11.12
SS12	Labatie d'Andaure - Lalouvesc	19.67km	13.03
SS13	St Bonnet - St Bonnet	25.93km	13.45
SS14	Lamastre - St Barthelemy Grozon	18.76km	15.10
Serv G	Valence (45 mins)		16.29
Finish	Monaco		N/A

Sunday 21 January: Leg 3 (continued) Monaco - Monaco

Start	Monaco		08.57
SSS	Monaco circuit	2.80km	09.00
Finish	Monaco		09.10

Total		131.52km	
Rally Total		332.06km	