



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

**2012 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP
RALLY ITALIA SARDEGNA**

Pre-event Press Conference
Thursday 18 October

Present:

Petter Solberg, Ford World Rally Team
Mikko Hirvonen, Citroën Total World Rally Team
Ott Tänak, M-Sport Ford World Rally Team
Chris Atkinson, WRC Team MINI Portugal

Q:

Petter, big news this week with Ford announcing the withdrawal of its title sponsorship from the WRC. What did you think when you heard the news?

PS:

I had heard some rumours about it but still it's hard to believe after Malcolm [Wilson] has run Ford for 17 years. I must say that all the work he had done and the effort he put in the background, it's a big, big thing and everybody knows the impact it has on the sport. I'm very sorry for the team, for Malcolm and everybody, but Malcolm is a tough guy and he will know how to turn it around. There are a lot of good people in the team so for sure they'll find a solution for the future.

Q:

What does it mean for you and your hopes of a drive next season? What are your options?

PS:

I have a plan A, B and C. For sure it is going to be a little bit different Championship next year if Loeb is not doing anything – if he's not changing his mind – so you never know. We have to wait now and see if we can have anything ready before Spain.

Q:

Do you feel positive about it?

PS:

I hope so!

Q:

Let's turn to this event and what your hopes are for the two last rounds with Ford this year?

PS:

The car improved a lot all year. It's still not perfect, maybe there are still some details to improve but the car is very, very fast now. Talking of Sardinia, I love the rally. I won it in 2004 and it's a fantastic place to be especially very, very exciting and with different character on each stage. We hope we'll be fighting for victory for sure. Spain it's another rally, Ford has been very fast there in the past.

Q:

You mentioned your victory here – what's the secret to winning here in Sardinia?

PS:

I think Ford will be very good here, the car is working very well in these hard conditions. Loeb is quite relaxed as he won the Championship but he will be on the pace for sure, Mikko is hungry for success as well and I think it will be a very interesting fight. It will be a tough rally and for sure everybody will be on the pace.

Q:

How important is it now to secure good results at the end of the season and in the next two events?

PS:

In the next two rallies we have to do everything we can to win, for Ford, Malcolm and the team it would be very, very important. But this has been also the strategy this year, we tried to push to the maximum and fight with Loeb. I wasn't driving for the Championship but I was driving to push. Next year will be different for sure, there will be more strategy driving.

Q:

Mikko, you have finished runner-up on this event the past five times, could this be the time you go out and win?

MH:

I'm not sure if it something to brag about, coming second here five times in a row, I've been consistent that's for sure! The Manufacturers title has been decided, Sébastien won the Drivers title, so now every driver wants to win these two rallies. I'm hungry to win as well, so for sure it's going to be an exciting weekend and everyone will be pushing very hard.

Q:

You have done something right, but what do you need to do to turn it in a win?

MH:

Something right or something wrong, it depends! I don't know exactly, for sure it's a very difficult rally and also very technical with narrow roads but it's still pretty fast. You really have to have confidence and when your car is precise enough you really have to go for it.

Q:

How did you pick your road position for today's stages?

MH:

We pretty much took the place we were thinking before the qualifying stage. I'm a bit surprised by the position the Fords took but we'll see tonight who made the best choice. Of course there's road cleaning, it could be dark and there might be dust, but we'll see.

Q:

Just two events to go this season, what is the plan from you and how do you feel the season has gone with a new team?

MH:

It always could be better, there's no question about it but I'm really happy with what we have achieved. We helped the team to win the Manufacturers title but there are a couple of rallies where we would have liked to fight harder to win and I haven't got my first win yet so that's bit disappointing, but I hope to change that this weekend.

Q:

Mikko, with Loeb beginning his exit from the WRC next year, how do you feel about your chances of the title next season?

MH:

Yes, maybe, but I'm sure I'm not the only one thinking like this at the moment. There are plenty of good drivers out there but we'll do our best and go for it.

Q:

Ott, last year at this event it was a win for you as part of the SWRC; good memories from that?

OT:

For sure it was one of my best events last year with S2000 and I think we have to be really confident this year here because these are really tricky roads with a lot of rocks so it's not going to be easy. But we're trying to concentrate really hard and do our best.

Q:

You had a good run at the last event, securing the Power Stage win – does it give you a boost of confidence coming here?

OT:

Of course you need confidence just to finish the event with no problems, so it certainly gave me a good feeling.

Q:

You chose second position for this afternoon's stages, what was the thinking behind that? And was it your choice completely or did you have some advice from the team?

OT:

For sure I had a little advice from the team but just to hit the road between Jari Matti and Petter.

Q:

You mentioned this is a difficult event but what's the toughest part about Sardinia?

OT:

The speed changing quite often, as well during the stages the rhythm changes constantly and there are a lot of tricky places. You need to be really concentrated and a bit careful in some places. You have to push really hard for good results though. It will be maybe difficult in the beginning to find good pace but we're going for it and we'll try really hard.

Q:

In terms of next year's drive, what are the options open to you?

OT:

I think the easiest answer is that nobody knows at the moment and what we have to do is get a good result in the next two events. But for sure we're working on it and we'll try to find something.

Q:

That's the easy answer, what's the hard answer? Who you're talking to?

OT:

I'm talking to everybody, that's it!

Q:

Chris, this is the first time you tackle Sardinia with the MINI WRC, how much are you looking forward to the stages here?

CA:

It's definitely an event we were looking forward to after we did the first gravel rally in GB. We have a 01B here – the newer MINI – and we made some big improvements so we're certainly excited about it even though we could have had some more gravel rallies before the end of the year, but this is it so we have to go for it. It looks good, qualifying was okay, but I think we can go faster.

Q:

What are the main improvements of the 01B?

CA:

There are various things. The 01B is definitely a quicker car than 01A. Also there are things like weight and power, MINI has been improving the car and the team has been working on a lot of things so it's a whole combination really. It's always the details that matter when you have to close a few seconds gap. Of course you need more time in the car and testing too.

Q:

How much testing have you done?

CA:

We did a day on Sunday here which was good but unfortunately on Monday it rained so we didn't do much work for the rally itself. We did 150/200 kilometres which is good but obviously as a driver you always want more.

Q:

What's your ideal result here this weekend?

CA:

If we can fight with guys like Ott and Mads [Ostberg] we'll be happy and we'll know we're in a good position. The other factory cars and drivers are on good pace as are all the drivers – after all this is the WRC – but if we can close the gap we had in GB, where we were a bit further away and I couldn't fight with them, I'd be really happy

Q:

We have seen you compete with WRC Team MINI Portugal for the past few events; what is the future for you?

CA:

It's a shame, as it's never good to see a Manufacturer pulling back support as soon as we were starting to move forward and everything was going well, and we would have liked to continue. Our aim now is to complete the development, finish the season and ensure the homologation which will keep MINIs racing in the future – that is the most important thing. The team and the feedback I got is all positive on my side so we'd like to continue and see what plays out in the next few months.

Q:

It's not only WRC for you, it's the FIA Asia-Pacific Rally Championship as well?

CA:

Yes, we fly straight to Shanghai on Sunday night, we have to finish and secure that Championship. First we have to get a good result here which would be a great way to finish the season as well. Then we look forward to Spain, a mixed event, it will be interesting for sure as it's the first time I do one of those. Three rallies in four weeks, it will be a busy time for me.

Q:

Would your preference for next year be WRC?

CA:

The aim for sure is to be in the top of the sport. There are also some other good Championships out there, but now that I have my finger nails back in the WRC I'd like to stay here and continue the good work we've done this year.

FIA PRODUCTION CAR WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Michal Kosciuszko

Marcos Ligato

Q:

Michal, the final two rounds of the PWRC and it is going to be a thrilling battle to the finish! You are currently second in the Championship, 15 points behinds Benito Guerra. How do you feel approaching Italy?

MK:

I feel very good but I know there's some pressure on us and we have to win here, as we did in Germany. This rally is very, very tricky – much more difficult than Germany. Of course it is a different surface with narrow roads and very technical. Very low grip makes this event even more difficult. We are going to have a nice fight with a few drivers, not only with Benito [Guerra]. Marcos [Ligato] will be fast for sure, Nicolas [Fuchs] can be fast here as well, so it will be a nice competition.

Q:

What preparation have you been doing in the run-up to this event?

MK:

We did some testing and I had to get back into a Group N car after a short break. We did Rally Poland in a RRC [Regional Rally Car] and it was good fun there. Jumping back in a Group N after driving a RRC is difficult to get the feeling back, believe me. But I think it's okay now after the Shakedown.

Q:

What is the strategy for this event? Is it difficult when your main rival is your teammate?

MK:

Benny [Guerra] is a very nice guy, I really like him so fighting with him is even more difficult. It's easier to fight with somebody you don't like! It's a bit of a strange situation for me but it will be a really fair played fight. Being in the same team makes it a bit more difficult because he knows what I'm doing and I know what he's doing, so we need to fight just on the stages, that's the way how it should be.

Q:

What are the most difficult aspects of this event?

MK:

Staying on the road and not destroying the car because it's really easy if you lose the line to rip off the wheels in slow corners, fast corners, medium speed corners – you can do it everywhere. You need to be precise and use your pace notes – I really hope we did a good job during the recce.

Q:

Marcos mentioned how difficult the night stages are. What's your feeling?

MK:

I'm a specialist!

Q:

We know you're focused on the fight for the title but have you had any thoughts about next year?

MK:

That's a good question! I think we have something to do for next year. Building a very nice project in WRC, I think it's still a bit too early to say it officially. I really want to stay in WRC but maybe changing the car is a good idea. I want to change category, maybe go up!

Q:

Anything more you can tell us about that?

MK:

I would like to know something more about it but at the moment everything looks very optimistic to change category and jump in a really fast car – we still need some weeks. I hope we will know more in Spain.

Q:

Marcos, you are fourth in the PWRC standings going into this event but you still have a shot at the title also. What is the plan for you?

ML:

We feel good. We didn't have the best result in the last event in Germany so we must win here, but Michal [Kosciuszko] and Benito want the same. This rally is very difficult, narrow and in some places so fast with a lot of stones. We must finish but finish in front because if we don't take maximum points here we don't have any chance to win the title in Spain.

Q:

How many risks are you prepared to take to claim the win here?

ML:

We will see what happens in this rally but we know we have to win. If we don't set a good time in the first stage we will try to be faster. We must go flat-out even if it's a big risk here and easy to make a mistake. If we're not in front it will be no good. We must win!

Q:

What did you do in terms of preparation? Are you happy with the car set-up for the stages?

ML:

We tested only at the Shakedown as the car wasn't ready before, but the feeling is good, the car is fast and the times were very good. We will see; it's a very long rally. Maybe on Saturday it will be raining, that's what the forecast says. Today I think in the last stage it will be dark and I don't have a lot of experience on night stages as we don't do a lot of them in Argentina. We will see how we feel in the stages tonight.

Q:

Marcos, do you have plans for next season yet?

ML:

It's too early to say something. I would like to continue next year. We'll see with the new rules of the categories, we have to make a good choice. We have to talk about the programmes and the budgets but I would like to continue.

Q:

For both of you: what would it mean to win the PWRC title?

ML:

It would be very important for us to be World Champions. It would also help us to continue next year.

MK:

Of course it's the last chance to score points for the [current] PWRC title, it would be nice to be the last Champion but of course we have to do two good events.