

Latvala wins Rally New Zealand for Ford after dramatic finale

BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team drivers Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila today won Rally New Zealand after a storybook ending to this fifth round of the FIA World Rally Championship. After remarkable drama in the final few kilometres, the Finns won by just 2.4sec in their Ford Focus RS World Rally Car - the third closest finish ever. The victory means Ford becomes the most successful manufacturer in the history of the WRC with 75 wins.

Team-mates Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen finished fourth in another Focus RS WRC, to enable Ford to close to within five points of the lead in the manufacturers' championship standings with eight rounds remaining. Latvala's victory was his third career success and his first since triumphing in Italy almost 12 months ago. He climbs to second in the drivers' standings and Hirvonen moves up to third.

Ford and Rally New Zealand have a habit of generating excitement in recent years. The team won the manufacturers' world title here in 2006 for the first time in 27 years. Twelve months later Marcus Grönholm won after the closest finish in WRC history, with an advantage of just 0.3sec.

The event returned to Auckland as the host city for the first time since 2005. Organisers took advantage of new-for-2010 rules to increase the competitive distance to 396.50km over three days, making it the longest WRC round since 2004. The action took place on smooth, flowing speed tests to the north and south-west of the City of Sails. The predominantly gravel special stages, regarded as the best in the world by many drivers, were spiced up with the addition of several asphalt sections.

Latvala was one of four leaders during the opening day, which he ended in second. The 25-year-old Finn was frustrated after losing time yesterday and started the final day in third, 33.2sec from the lead but in a better start position than those ahead. He climbed a place on the second of the four speed tests on the Tasman Sea coastline near Raglan and went into the final stage, the legendary 29.67km Whaanga Coast, just 6.2sec from the lead.



Four drivers started with a chance of victory. Petter Solberg was the first to fall by the way-side when he crashed into a telegraph pole and then Sébastien Loeb spun, for the second time in the test, less than 10km from the finish. Remarkably leader Sébastien Ogier then went off the road just three corners from the finish. Amid all the drama, the consistent Latvala kept calm to power to a fairy tale victory.

"I didn't think it could happen, it's the most amazing and beautiful win," said Latvala. "Whaanga Coast showed its teeth. I neared the end of the stage and could see a car's bumper on the road but I didn't know which car it was from. I didn't know we had won until three minutes after the finish of the stage and Miikka did the calculations. It's my best win and makes up for my disappointments.

"I can't believe I'm second in the championship. I wasn't the fastest here but I was the most consistent and that paid off when it mattered. I need to carry on doing the job I'm doing as second driver because my strategy is working. It was a fantastic rally over the most beautiful roads in the world," he added.

Hirvonen struggled to find the pace he wanted during the opening two days, and the 29-year-old Finn began the final day in sixth, a minute from the lead. He more than halved that deficit during the opening two stages this morning as he climbed to fifth and then gained another position on the final stage when Solberg crashed out.

"It was a difficult weekend but I was able to climb up today and score valuable points for the team and myself," he said. "After yesterday I thought there would be no chance of a good result. I struggled and the mistake I made cost a lot. I need to think about why I had no speed yesterday. If I could start the weekend again I would change my Friday set up."

Delighted BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team director Malcolm Wilson said: "This sport has a habit of producing the unexpected. The last three days have been full-on excitement and the drama we witnessed takes some believing. Jari-Matti displayed great maturity. We worked hard with him after last season to develop greater consistency and maturity, and he showed how far he has progressed."

Ford of Europe motorsport chief Gerard Quinn hailed Ford's 75th WRC win. "Ford is a stalwart supporter of world rallying and our 75th victory is a landmark achievement. Ford has won with the Escort and we have won with the Sierra but it's fitting that the Focus, our most successful rally car, should claim our 75th victory in its final season as our WRC challenger."

News from other Ford teams

The Ford Fiesta S2000 claimed a clean sweep of the podium positions in the S-WRC support category. Jari Ketomaa and Mika Stenberg led home Xevi Pons and Alex Haro by 54.1sec, with



Martin Prokop and Jan Tománek third. The Fiesta S2000, which will form the basis of Ford's all-new Fiesta WRC for the 2011 campaign, has won the opening three rounds of the category. Pons leads the championship.

Next round

The opening half of the season ends on gravel with the Rally de Portugal. It is based in Faro on the Algarve coast on 27 - 30 May.

Final positions

1. **J-M Latvala/M Anttila FIN Ford Focus RS 4hr 04min 09.8sec**
2. S Ogier/J Ingrassia FRA Citroen C4 4hr 04min 12.2sec
3. S Loeb/D Elena FRA Citroen C4 4hr 04min 25.0sec
4. **M Hirvonen/J Lehtinen FIN Ford Focus RS 4hr 04min 31.1sec**
5. D Sordo/M Marti ESP Citroen C4 4hr 04min 35.6sec
6. **M Wilson/S Martin GBR Ford Focus RS 4hr 07min 35.8sec**
7. **H Solberg/I Minor NOR Ford Focus RS 4hr 10min 25.1sec**
8. J Ketomaa/M Stenberg FIN Ford Fiesta S2000 4hr 14min 29.1sec
9. **F Villagra/J Perez Companc ARG Ford Focus RS 4hr 14min 59.6sec**
- 10 X Pons/A Haro ESP Ford Fiesta S2000 4hr 15min 23.2sec

Drivers

1. S Loeb 108pts
2. **J-M Latvala 72pts**
3. **M Hirvonen 64pts**
4. S Ogier 63pts
5. P Solberg 53pts
6. D Sordo 34pts

Manufacturers

1. Citroen Total 156pts
2. **BP Ford Abu Dhabi 151pts**
3. Citroen Junior 75pts
4. **Stobart M-Sport Ford 74pts**
5. **Munchi's Ford 32pts**

Stage Times

Stage 18: 1. Hirvonen 7min 53.5sec; 2. P Solberg + 0.2; 3. Latvala + 1.9; 4. Loeb + 5.2; 5. Wilson + 5.9; 6. Sordo + 6.0.

Overall: 1. Loeb 3hr 13min 44.4sec; 2. Ogier + 4.5; 3. Latvala + 24.6; 4. Sordo + 43.0; 5. P Solberg + 43.3; 6. Hirvonen + 49.7.

Stage 19: 1. P Solberg 21min 27.9sec; 2. Hirvonen + 0.5; 3. Latvala + 7.6; 4. Sordo + 15.0; 5. Ogier + 22.1; 6. Wilson + 26.8.

Overall: 1. Ogier 3hr 35min 38.9sec; 2. Latvala + 5.6; 3. P Solberg + 16.7; 4. Loeb + 21.7; 5. Hirvonen + 23.6; 6. Sordo + 31.4.

Stage 20: 1. Loeb 7min 30.9sec; 2. Ogier + 4.0; 3. P Solberg + 4.1; 4. Latvala + 4.6; 5. Hirvonen + 5.0; 6. Sordo + 5.1.

Overall: 1. Ogier 3hr 43min 13.8sec; 2. Latvala + 6.2; 3. P Solberg + 16.8; 4. Loeb + 17.7; 5. Hirvonen + 24.6; 6. Sordo + 32.5.

Stage 21: 1. Sordo 20min 49.3sec; 2. Latvala + 0.5; 3. Hirvonen + 3.4; 4. Loeb + 4.2; 5. Ogier + 9.1; 6. Wilson + 23.5.

Overall: 1. Latvala 4hr 04min 09.8sec; 2. Ogier + 2.4; 3. Loeb + 15.2; 4. Hirvonen + 21.3; 5. Sordo + 25.8; 6. Wilson + 3:26.0.