

Mikko opens with podium

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The opening joust of the 2008 WRC produced the expected battle between reigning champions Castrol Ford Abu Dhabi and current asphalt kings Citroen.

While Sebastien Loeb became the first driver to claim five successive wins on the Monte Carlo Rally, second place for Mikko Hirvonen prompted Loeb to admit he would be a tough opponent once the series moves onto snow and gravel. The Ford-driving Finn claimed his first ever podium finish on this event while team mate Jari-Matti Latvala's debut in the official squad bagged more points for Ford.

Loeb's team mate Dani Sordo claimed the first stage win of the year before the reigning drivers' champion took an iron grip on the event. Hirvonen led the Ford team challenge home in third after easing off on the final icy 10kms of the second stage but new team mate Jari-Matti Latvala fell foul of the new tyre rules with no 'mousse' inserts to provide puncture insurance. "I hit a rock and smashed the wheel," he said. "There were 100kms to go so we had to stop and change the wheel – something we wouldn't have needed to do last year," he said.

With higher temperatures on Friday's stages the risk of snow and ice receded. Hirvonen eased clear of Subaru's Chris Atkinson to close the gap to Sordo in second place behind the fast-disappearing Loeb. "I must be close to flat out for the rest of the event," he said. "I'm targeting second place at least."

Hirvonen's tenacity was rewarded on Saturday when engine failure dumped Sordo out of contention and moved the Finn into second.

The revised route for this year's event meant a return to the iconic Col du Turini for the final leg before a blast round the Grand Prix circuit rounded out the first contest of the season. With over two minutes in hand, Loeb was able to cruise to his fifth consecutive Monte win but second was a solid start for Hirvonen and the Ford team, once again leaving the rest of the pack trailing in his wake.

The battle for third was resolved on the final stage with new Stobart Ford driver Francois Duval just unable to edge out Atkinson after going into the stage just 1.1 seconds apart after cutting 19 seconds from the Australian in a final day thriller.

"It was a fantastic start for us and Mikko really stepped into Marcus Gronholm's shoes," said Castrol Ford Abu Dhabi team boss Malcolm Wilson. "We've got a strong team and some strong events for us coming up. I'm very impressed with both of our main drivers and also those in or satellite teams here."

Team news: Latvala targets victory

Castrol-Ford newcomer Jari-Matti Latvala is aiming for his first WRC win this year as he supports new team captain Mikko

Hirvonen. "My aim is to be on the podium as much as I can this year but my dream is to win a round of the series as well." Hirvonen says consistency is the key to his title bid: "I must win as often as possible - but if not I mustn't be less than second," he said.

Rally news: Super2000 gets 2010 green light

The current WRC cars are expected to be the mainstay of the series for just two more seasons before the new Super2000 category takes over. FIA deputy president Marco Piccinini made the unofficial announcement on the eve of the Monte Carlo Rally and WRC newcomer Suzuki immediately confirmed that it expects to have a Super2000 car competing later this season. Ford and Citroen are also known to be working on suitable cars for the new category.

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