



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

**2007 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP
RALLY d'ITALIA SARDEGNA**

**Post-event FIA Press Conference
20 May 2007**

Present:

1st - Marcus Grönholm – BP-Ford World Rally Team

1st - Timo Rautiainen – BP-Ford World Rally Team

2nd - Mikko Hirvonen – BP-Ford World Rally Team

2nd - Jarmo Lehtinen – BP-Ford World Rally Team

3rd - Daniel Sordo – Citroen Total World Rally Team

3rd - Marc Marti – Citroen Total World Rally Team

Malcolm Wilson, Representative of the winning manufacturer, BP-Ford World Rally Team

Welcome to the final FIA press conference.

Q:

Marcus, a win for you and it makes you the second most successful driver in World Rally Championship history, with 27 wins. Were you expecting it? How did you find out about Seb's problem? Do you think you could have beaten him over the course of this rally anyway or not? How badly did the mechanical problems you had compromise your chances?

MG:

Yes before the rally yes (I thought we could win). But after the first day we have a problem with the shock absorbers and were again behind some 22 seconds or something, and it's difficult. We had a problem on Saturday in the morning, but then surprisingly Seb made a mistake. After that it was ok. I just heard when I came to the finish of the first stage in the morning. I heard that he stopped on the stage but didn't know why. That was the first I heard. I was a little bit surprised, yes. I think it's easy to calculate that without our problems we would have been equal with Sebastien. This time we had the feeling and the car was good, so it would have been a really hard fight today I think.

Q:

Congratulations Timo. Yesterday, you had a problem when the spare wheel of the car fell out. What happened exactly? Did you notice it had gone? Were you worried that you might have incurred a penalty?

TR:

We came to the finish of SS 8 and there was the FIA Technical Delegate there who informed me we were missing a spare wheel. There's not so much you can do at that moment. I just informed my team we don't have a spare wheel and at that point the only possibility was to continue. The problem was we had two punctures and one was so bad the ATS was coming out of the tyre. We quickly negotiated what to do with that badly damaged tyre and put it in the rear and did the last stage. All went okay, but of course we were driving quite slowly and the BF Goodrich tyre was working, even when it was badly damaged it was working fantastic. We could reach the service and that's it. Of course I was worried. I was clearly informed that coming back to service missing one of the wheels you had when you left the service would be a breach of the regulations. But after a close inspection and reading the exact working in the regulation, we found out that we have not broken the spirit of the regulations. We could explain this to the Stewards and everything was fine.

Q:

Mikko, Congratulations on second position. Again, was this a bit unexpected for you? Are you surprised that Seb went off – were these difficult stages today? What did you think of your speed here relative to Seb and Marcus?

MH:

For sure it looked like, especially on Saturday morning, that Sebastien and Marcus were going to fight for the win. This morning I was expecting everybody just to calm down and take the positions that they were in, so in that moment it was a big surprise that he (Loeb) made a mistake and we managed to get up to second. It was very tricky today. Even before the rally I mentioned the first stage this morning was the biggest challenge of the rally. It surprised everybody. Lot of corners over the crests, it was a very difficult stage.

Q:

Marcus had one or two issues here – did you have any mechanical problems? You started the first day very quickly with a massive jump on the opening stage: did you both enjoy the roads here?

JL:

Yeah, it was a trouble-free run and no worries with the car. I enjoyed the stages here. For sure we are back on track after Argentina, we were kind of lost there and now we are a bit closer to Marcus and Seb and it's a positive thing which gives us a lot of confidence for Greece.

Q:

Dani, you had a reasonably careful start to the rally before picking up speed as the three days went on. Was this part of your strategy or did you have a problem?

DS:

No, the first day was more slower stages, more curves. After Saturday the stages were faster. I like these two days more. The battle was really really nice for the spectators and for the drivers. I liked today a lot.

Q:

Marc, there were some new stages for this year – what did you think of them? Were they an improvement over previous years?

MM:

For me it's a nice rally, a rally very particular. You must find the rhythm because it is a little bit narrow and really very fast. The stages are tricky – I think we can find stages like yesterday, which to me were really the spirit of the rally. For me it's a very nice rally – difficult for the co-driver because you have to relay a lot of information to the driver, but for me it's a very important job that I do it.

Q:

Malcolm, congratulations. What is your take on today's events? How surprised were you that Seb made a mistake? What did you think the chances were of a Ford one-two-three, with Henning fighting Dani?

MW:

I think everyone's probably as shocked as we were to see Sebastien actually make a mistake, but there were some new stages, and they were obviously quite difficult. Having said that, having the lead he had, it was basically in his control. We were watching the stage on the map and first of all Marcus stopped. And I can tell you there was a lot of activity in our management office, because we didn't know what had happened. He obviously had a spin or something. And we're also reflecting on that. The next thing the dot went blue for Sébastien (on the tracking system), and we thought maybe it was just the system or something playing up. Obviously we watched and watched to see if he got going again like Marcus did, and then we heard the news that he'd gone off. Yes, a big surprise. Obviously it was a great battle as Dani said, and I think Henning enjoyed it as well. Really I think he lost out yesterday when he had a big spin and lost about 20 seconds. It was a great fight, and obviously we were hoping to get three Fords on the podium like we did in Norway. In this event it obviously was not meant to be.

Q:

You are now leading the Drivers' Championship by seven points. How critical is this to your chances? Would you say this revolutionises your prospects? How will you be approaching the next event in Greece now?

MG:

I mean it's very good to be in front by seven points, but everything is still open. But it's good and the next rally is Greece which we won last time. Then it's Finland and we will have a little bit of a more updated car. The future looks very very good, but no, it's not a turning point yet. There are lots of rallies to come and it's still a long way to go.

Q:

What do you think your tactics will be for the next events – have they changed now? We had six stages today with no service at all – what did you think about that? Is it a good thing?

TR:

No we have the same tactics and strategies that we have had all the time. We either have to win or be second and fighting with Sebastien in the Championship. It's always better to take full points or we have to settle for next best and take second, otherwise it's too hard. Now we have a seven point buffer and it is very good of course, but when you know what kind of man there is behind you, I would not say that I'm relieved. (Regarding the stages) Yes I think it would be good because the rhythm is good. But otherwise the distance between the first and second stage ruined it a little bit; it was a long road section and you lose a little bit the tune up of the stage. Otherwise it was okay. The sad point is the service was missing. We only have ten minutes in the morning, and then that's it. Everything is packed up when we come back here, and I think part of the team would be happy to see us and celebrate together.

Q:

With Seb's non finish here, you are just four points behind him in the Championship. Do you think you can challenge him at all for the rest of the year?

MH:

I can try, but for me the season has gone as I was planning and I was hoping to be close in the points, even if I was not winning the rallies. And now we are there. So far the season is coming along very well. Slowly we are getting closer and we are getting more consistent as well. Maybe one day we can fight with them again.

Q:

What did you think of this rally Jarmo? Were you and Mikko able to use your experience here to good effect?

JL:

Yeah, the stages we had done previously, that was okay. Many stages we were quite close to Marcus and Seb and that was good. Today, there were new stages and if we had to fight, I am pretty confident we would have been pretty close.

Q:

Now that you have scored your second podium on gravel, will this give you more confidence for the following rounds? What do you think your prospects are for the Acropolis Rally now?

DS:

More confident yes, but not for the podium, but more for the times to be closer to the other drivers.

Q:

Now that Citroen is behind in the Manufacturers' Championship, does it make it all the more important for you and Dani to score points on every round?

MM:

No, for us the Championship from the beginning of the season is the same. We are driving and learning because Dani is very young and we need to take the time. However of course it is important to finish the rally for us and for Citroen. We will see in the future. I think Dani and I are doing a great job. The gap is not so important for us, it's important to finish the rallies. We have now been on the podium for three rallies.

Q:

Talking about the Championship, you're now in the situation of leading the Manufacturers' and the Drivers' classification. How confident does that make you for the rest of the year? What's going to be your approach now? Does this hand you a crucial advantage?

MW:

I think it's going to be no different to last year. I'm sure it's going to go down to the end of the season; things are no different. Okay, if you look at it, we are in a much better position this year than we were this time last year. But it's like Marcus and the guys said, we haven't got a big enough advantage to say it's in the bag, in any way shape or form. It's more important for us as a team to keep focused and keep developing the car. We as a team can't come off the throttle pedal, and we as a team have to give these guys the best possible chance. I mean, we are not even half way through the season yet.

Questions from the floor:

Martin Holmes (Martin Holmes Rallying, UK)

Q:

The Sardinian Rally has traditionally been hard on tyres. This year we haven't heard anything like the horrific stories we have heard before. Has the rally lost its edge, or have the tyres got better?

MW:

I can say from our point of view, you are right, the wear side of it was less than we saw last year. Why that is, the drivers will have to answer that. The other side of it is that we have seen more punctures here than ever before. I don't know if the rocks are getting more exposed or what. Certainly the damage done to tyres has been far greater than in previous years.

FIA JUNIOR RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

1st – Urmo Aava

1st – Kuldar Sikk

Q:

Urmo, congratulations. You led on the opening day and it was a big battle with P-G (Andersson): what was that like? How hard were you having to push?

UA:

The plan was to start maximum and not to have a puncture which is the most difficult thing for us here in Sardinia. Both of us were very lucky and didn't get a puncture. And then at the end of Friday the difference between me and P-G was eight seconds, so it's not much. At least both of us were pushing and didn't get punctures. It was difficult for both of us. I think it's really hard, and I have knowledge from previous years that you can get punctures here. And before the rally we thought if we got three or four punctures we could still win. And we got zero punctures and P-G got one and that was the difference.

Q:

These stages even caught out a three time World Champion Sebastien Loeb. How hard were they for you?

UA:

These stages were, I can say, maybe the most difficult because they were very slippery and unpredictable. The dust was hanging between the trees, so it was really tricky.

Q:

How big was the danger of getting punctures here? Did you have to drive very carefully? Do you need mostly skill or luck to avoid them – or both?

KS:

I think's both skill and luck. But again I think that knowledge and maybe the speed that we and P-G had also, has helped us a lot. We had to push everywhere.

Q:

On the second day you hit a tree quite hard: what happened? How lucky were you to get away with it?

UA:

The traction was wrong and unfortunately that was the mistake. The second day stages were more slippery than we expected so the rear suspension of the car was too hard. We were struggling quite a lot and oversteering the car. On the third stage on Saturday we hit the tree because of the car. But we consider ourselves very lucky because hitting the tree, having a spin and still only losing 20 seconds, you have to have luck to do it like that.

Q:

Then your team-mates had a puncture yesterday afternoon and lost the lead. How nervous was the final day for you, when you had to control your advantage? Were you worried about another puncture?

KS:

I can't say for Urmo and I can't say anymore really because for years and years we have been leading and on the last day, or near the end, something just happens like a puncture. So I was thinking and taking it easy and to do our thing as good as we can and not do a risk like we were risking on Friday and Saturday. And it came!

Q:

You've now closed up another two points on your team-mate P-G (Andersson) in the Championship classification. How much does that improve your prospects?

UA:

I think it improved our chances quite a lot because if we would have been second here it would be very hard to fight for the Championship. Now I think it's quite good and I'm looking forward to the next three events we have on Tarmac. Now everything is possible.

Q:

Urmo, you and your team-mate have dominated the opposition, are you surprised the others aren't closer. Is it just good luck between the two of you?

UA:

I think I have a lot more knowledge than the rest of the drivers because I have been here the longest, and also P-G has been here half a year less. I think it's quite a lot of knowledge that I have so I think that is why we are the fastest and I think that I should be the fastest.