



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

**2009 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP
RALLY D'ITALIA SARDEGNA**

Pre-event Press Conference
Thursday 21 May

Present:

Sébastien Loeb, Citroën Total World Rally Team
Malcolm Wilson, BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team
Matthew Wilson, Stobart VK M-Sport Ford Rally Team
Petter Solberg, Petter Solberg World Rally Team
Simone Bertolotti, FIA Junior World Rally Championship
Alessandro Bettega, FIA Junior World Rally Championship
Bernardo Sousa, FIA Production Car World Rally Championship
Eyvind Brynildsen, FIA Production Car World Rally Championship

Welcome to the pre-event FIA Press Conference.

Q:

Sébastien, after five wins already this season you lead the Drivers' Championship by 20 points. You have been first on the road on the opening day at every event this year, but would say this one is the trickiest for road sweeping so far?

SL:

Maybe. I hope not, but I know here it can be very difficult to be first on the road. I have no choice, I have to accept it. Maybe we will lose some time and that will be the most difficult to accept: to say: "Okay, I'm losing time, I can do nothing about it, I will wait."

Q:

It seems that tactics could once again come into play this weekend. Your thoughts?

SL:

In my position I cannot do a lot. I cannot decide. I'm the first to finish the first day, so the other drivers can play with that. There is no plan at the moment.

Q:

You have won six consecutive events dating from Rally GB last year and if you win this that would be a new record of seven in a row. Are you losing count of all the records you are breaking and how much do they really mean to you?

SL:

The record is still mine, so it's not so important to beat it. I will try to beat it, but it's not the main motivation. I will just concentrate on my rally and the Championship. If we break records it's nice, but not the main motivation.

Q:

In terms of sheer speed on the stages, who is your biggest concern?

SL:

If you look at the starting order, Jari-Matti [Latvala] is in a very good position. He's seventh on the road and this can make a big, big difference.

Q:

Do you like the stages here?

SL:

They're very difficult. The roads can be very twisty and narrow, very technical. You don't have good grip and the car is sliding a lot. You have to be very precise, which makes it very difficult. For example, the new stages are very difficult. One of them is very narrow and very technical in the trees and the other one is not so nice.

Q:

Malcolm, let's start by talking about Markko Martin, who has been helping out the team at the recent test. What was the thinking behind getting Markko involved again?

Malcolm Wilson:

We couldn't get Sébastien to test the car, so we went for Markko! No, when Markko was with the team, he was instrumental in working with Christian [Loriaux] on the 2003 car and he was always one of the best test drivers we worked with. We discussed it with the drivers and Mikko was particularly keen to give him some confidence that we're going in the right direction. We're really pleased, it worked very well. Markko enjoyed being back in the car, but there are absolutely no plans – before you ask the question – of him driving the car [in competition].

Q:

Could he test again?

Malcolm Wilson:

There are no plans at the moment. He has purchased a Focus for one of his customers in Estonia and I know he's keen on Super 2000 from a commercial point of view, but at the moment there are no plans.

Q:

What's the strategy for this event?

Malcolm Wilson:

There is only one strategy – and that's to beat the man on my right [Loeb]. Historically, there is an advantage to run further down the field, but anything can happen. We've probably got the advantage here as both our drivers are behind Sébastien and Dani [Sordo]. But there are new stages on this rally. It's going to be interesting.

Q:

Sardinia is the halfway point in the season; in terms of the Championships, do the team feel both the Drivers and Manufacturers have slipped away?

Malcolm Wilson:

The feeling after the last rally is that it's a mountain to climb. But look at what's left; it's going to be a big challenge. The Manufacturers' Championship will be more difficult than the Drivers'. We're not giving up. We've put a lot of effort in to this and we hope it pays dividends.

Q:

Will the strategy now change for the remaining events?

Malcolm Wilson:

We need to win rallies now. We're not giving up, but we have to find a way to stop Sébastien. We will be pushing for victories.

Q:

Ford's commitment to the Championship is till the end of this season – when can we hope to hear more of the future plans?

Malcolm Wilson:

Obviously, we're in discussion all of the time, but I don't need to tell anybody in this room the difficult situation the motor industry is in. Ford wants to stay in the sport; Ford has a long and illustrious heritage in the sport. But it comes down to a business decision. The regulations are clearer, which means we can work on the numbers and start looking at plans – we hope we will have a decision in the next few months and hopefully the economy will pick up and we will start to sell more motor cars.

Q:

Recently Moto GP rider Valentino Rossi was quoted as saying that he would like to switch to four wheels at the end of his Moto GP career and that he had a great relationship with Ford so would maybe drive there. What did you think of that comment and have you spoken with Rossi about the future?

Malcolm Wilson:

As you can imagine, everybody back at M-Sport was pleased to see that a six or seven-time World Champion could make those comments about the team. We had a great time with him on Rally GB. His management is here in Sardinia, he's serious about getting in to the sport and we'd love to have him back in the Stobart team. We'd welcome him with open arms.

Q:

Matthew, we know that rally drivers like to maintain their physical fitness in between events, but it seems you have been going over and above the call of duty in that respect. Tell me about the bike race which took you just over nine hours to complete.

MW:

It was a good challenge. It was 113 miles long over every Lakeland pass. There was a lot of climbs involved. Scott [Martin] and I did it, total time was nine hours, but total riding time was about eight. I enjoyed it.

Q:

Should we have any concerns about you switching disciplines?

MW:

That was enough for me! That was probably the most difficult single day thing I've done. It's good for the heat here, we've got more hot rallies coming up which makes it more important.

Q:

You have a limited testing programme ahead of events but you did test on Monday - how did it go?

MW:

It was fantastic. I went to Mikko's test on Sunday. I sat in the car with him which was fantastic and I learned from the changes he made in his car. I used those changes in my

test on Monday, where we did about 90km, which was great – it put us in the right frame of mind for the rally.

Q:

After finishing in the points on all but one event so far this season, what are your hopes for this one?

MW:

More of the same. That's the plan. If you take out the stupid mistake from Portugal, we'd have been in the top seven on every rally. That's the plan – and to keep on improving. We made a lot of changes on the recce. We struggled here last year, there were a lot of inconsistencies last season. Hopefully, this year will get better and we can keep the run going.

Q:

Can you challenge for a podium?

MW:

I don't know. I think it's still a little way off. If we can keep learning, and we are learning massive amounts, but there's still a long, long way to go. But it's going in the right direction and as long as we keep doing that then I'm happy.

Q:

Petter, you have a few upgrades to the Citroen Xsara for this event – what are they and what difference will they make?

PS:

I can feel good changes. It's better when it's very warm. Shakedown worked very well. We have mechanical differentials, a bigger intercooler and air intake. Seb knows about this, but it's good for me.

Q:

What's it like see him in your old car Sébastien?

SL:

It's good. He was in a difficult situation for some years, but now he's fighting for the podium and I'm happy for him. I know he likes this car and it's good for him.

Q:

Do you believe the car could win events against the works teams?

PS:

There is no chance of that happening. This is good. The engine is better. I hope it's no warmer than now, I struggled out of some hairpins this morning when it was starting to get hotter. I'll be very happy to fight for the podium

Q:

There were rumours that you would be changing the car, is that still a possibility?

PS:

I have a lot of plans. I have the upgrade on the Xsara, I'll make a decision after this rally. I'm sure we'll know tomorrow night. It's very difficult to make a clear strategy. It's very difficult with no factory seat, we can only do the best we can and look after the people in the team.

Q:

This will be the fifth event with your own team, how has the whole experience been so far?

PS:

Now I understand what Malcolm [Wilson] has it, and I only have one car. The thing is, I have good people around me. Ken [Rees] is doing a lot of things and he has a lot of experience and Phil [Mills] is doing a good job. We're doing rally by rally to try and get a good result. In these tough times it's not the easiest job.

Q:

In Argentina, Henning [Solberg] went ahead of you in the Manufacturers' standings, he said if he could finish ahead of you at the end of the season it would make his Christmas! Does the fight back begin here?

PS:

He has said that since I was 18 years old, so, no, no! Henning is very passionate. He will have a very good rally here, he's very motivated. We will see on Sunday night or at the end of the season, if we do all the rallies. It's nice to have a fight and a good story.

FIA JUNIOR WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Q:

Every driver wants to do well at their home event, what are your hopes for this weekend?

SB:

We come here in Italy to do the best job we can do. We really don't know how is our position in the Championship. We are very unlucky, we have to do superally. This is our first gravel rally of the year. We have to push and see what happens.

Q:

This is your home event, but it's a really strong field. Will it be hard to get on the podium?

SB:

For sure it will be very difficult. It's the first race when all nine drivers are in the race and anything can happen. For sure, Alessandro [Bettega], [Martin] Prokop and [Michal] Kosciuszko are the best now. But we will try to fight for the podium.

Q:

Alessandro, you competed in Argentina in a S1600 and now it's back to the R3 for your home event...

AB:

Let's say I last drove a Super 1600 in 2007, so I had to change my mind-setting [for Argentina]. The S1600 is still quite different from the R3. In Argentina, we were quite unlucky: we had to stop from leading on the second day. But I am happy to be back here with the R3, we have a lot to try with the set-up. I am at home here. I have driven this rally five times. I hope we can find a good set-up with the car.

Q:

After a field of just three drivers in Argentina, we are back to a strong field of competition. How tough will it be to fight for a win here against the likes of Prokop and Kosciuszko?

AB:

I have to believe I can win. We were quite unlucky the first two rallies. The results are for Kosciuszko. We need a very good result, he [Kosciuszko] already has a lot of points. Last year, he and Martin Prokop were very strong on this rally. If they push, it will be quite hard for me. I will have to push harder. Usually, there are many things which can affect the rally. This time I want to do very well and I will try to push from the first stage.

Q:

This rally is tough and deceptively rough; what will be the strategy this weekend?

AB:

In the Junior Championship it's very difficult to have a strategy. Every time, somebody is starting like hell. You start and say, "Okay we'll go at 80 per cent", but then at the end of the first stage you see you have 20 seconds to make up. I will have to start as fast as I can, but there are a few stages where you need concentration. For example the new one is full of big rocks and it will be full of ruts, there are a lot of long corners and this will make it hard to follow the lines of the World Rally Cars. This one will be very tough as a stage.

FIA PRODUCTION CAR WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Q:

Eyvind, at the last event in Argentina you competed without your own car and had to borrow one – what exactly happened there?

EB:

It was small mistake from the shipping company to send the car to Rio de Janeiro instead of Buenos Aires. We ended up renting a car from Federico Villagra. It was very nice of him to give us the opportunity to drive the car. The team only had a few days to prepare the car. Of course, it's not the best way, but we came through the rally and scored four very valuable points. I drove one stage flat out on Friday, but the rest I was on two cylinders or front-wheel drive. The important thing is that we're in Italy now.

Q:

Despite not having your car you still managed to pick up points from Argentina and you are still in contention for the Championship.

EB:

It's only four or five points between us guys at the top. I fight against [Production] World Champion Nasser Al Attiyah and Bernardo [Sousa] and many good drivers. We need to keep up the good work and it will be good.

Q:

We have seen you on the podium twice this year – but not yet with a win. Can you get one here?

EB:

It can be anywhere. It's really tough for us, when the guys with the S2000 are in the business. We have to speed up. Patrik [Sandell] will be very quick here and the other guys. I'm not sure. It's my first time here, it was my first time in Argentina and it will be in Australia. I've been to Sweden twice and Norway and Portugal was my second time. Each time I go somewhere again I can see my pace notes are better. I need to think with two brains: one for the Championship and one for the rally. I think we need to think for the championship, I've still got Australia and GB – you can't think too much about the guys like Nasser [Al-Attiyah] who are going so quickly.

Q:

Bernardo, you have had a fair amount of bad luck so far this season, can you turn it around here?

BS:

We started the worst way today. We had a steering arm broken in the hairpin, there was no damage, but we stopped. This Championship is terrible this year. We hoped we could change it on this rally. It's started in the worst way, but we're hoping it will improve.

Q:

With the accident at shakedown in Portugal you weren't able to perform which means you haven't had a huge amount of time in the new car. You competed with it a few weeks ago in a different championship; will that experience help you here?

BS:

For sure, the kilometres we did on the Rally Azores was very important. We changed a lot in the car. The car's not in the best shape, we can still change a lot of things, but we do have some experience. There's a long way to go to perfection, but let's continue to work and I think we can make some good results.

Q:

It's your first time here in Sardinia, what do you think of the stages from what you have seen on the recce?

BS:

It's very tough. It's very narrow. The weather is also going to be tough. For us, the main goal is to finish for the first time this year. We had no problems, so we just want to finish. We need points at this stage of the Championship and we need more experience of the car.