



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L' AUTOMOBILE

2021 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

ARCTIC RALLY FINLAND POWERED BY CAPITALBOX

Pre-event FIA Press Conference
February 25, 2021

Present:

Thierry Neuville (BEL) – Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team
Kalle Rovanperä (FIN) – Toyota Gazoo Racing World Rally Team
Oliver Solberg (NOR) – Hyundai 2C Competition
Gus Greensmith (GBR) – M-Sport Ford World Rally Team

Q:

Thierry we'll start with you, you're wrapped up for winter and it is proper winter conditions out there, how excited are you to get started at Arctic Rally Finland?

TN:

Really excited about the conditions we saw in the stages, which for me are really nice and challenging at the same time. Obviously, for many years now, we've asked for a proper winter rally and nobody can complain we got proper winter conditions. I'm really excited to kick off. Obviously, the week was quite long so far because we came here already on Monday as usual. Recce started a day later but the days weren't that long, a lot of waiting in our room but tomorrow the waiting is over and we're going to attack the stages.

Q:

We saw a great result from you on Rallye Monte-Carlo in what were obviously difficult conditions with a new co-driver sitting alongside you. You had to adapt to each other. That seemed to go well but have you done any work between the events with Martijn to hone the craft?

TN:

First of all, I can't say it was a great result in Monte-Carlo and my boss will kill me because he obviously wasn't satisfied with the overall result. But I think for ourselves in the car, Martijn and me, third was the maximum we could have done with the conditions we were facing without any mileage before the rally and especially on such a challenging event as Monte-Carlo. It was again a difficult one. But we took good points for the season opener and we are not coming here with the worst starting position - probably not the best as well - but we are somehow in between, so we need to get the best out of that and try to get an advantage where we can against our main competitors, which are lying obviously in front and just behind. If we can somehow play with these guys, I think we can have a satisfactory result at the end of the weekend.

Q:

You mentioned your boss there, Andrea Adamo, and he said he wasn't happy with the team's performance on Rallye Monte-Carlo. Does that then put a bit of pressure on your shoulders coming here?

TN:

I think there are more people with pressure than us. I think what he said was mainly the overall result, which wasn't nice for Hyundai and was clearly true. We saved somehow the situation with being on the podium, but it's only the start of the season and, as you know, the rally season can be very long - it wasn't last year, I guess - but this year, it can hopefully be longer with more excitement again and proper rallies, where we can also play our cards and I'm sure there will be plenty of good rallies.

Q:

Kalle, seems that many have you down as favourite for this event, given your 2020 Arctic Lapland Rally win and your current form. Are you feeling pressure from that expectation? Do you feel you have an advantage over the others with your experience?

KR:

Yeah, I can clearly see there is more excitement and pressure on me but I'm not really taking it like this. For sure, I'm more excited because it's a Finnish event and a lot of Finns are waiting for a good result. But I still feel I can do my job as best as I can and that's all I can do.

Q:

For people who have never been to the Arctic Rally before, and there are lots of journalists who haven't, how would you describe the stages that you'll be facing this weekend?

KR:

I think the event is really beautiful here, it's proper winter conditions. The stages are always in a really fast condition I would say, they are always really fast overall. This year we use quite technical stages also so it's not flat out all the time. There are also some quite tricky parts but, overall, it's a quite tricky event and really nice.

Q:

You tested in great conditions. Were you happy with the feedback from the car and the Pirelli tyres?

KR:

There is quite a big difference to Michelin from last year with the spike tyre, I would say. The Pirelli tyre is softer and we have to adapt the car to it and the driving style has to be a bit different in some places so there was some learning for us to do in the test but I think it went quite well.

Q:

You're a driver who's pretty tough on themselves and we certainly saw that in Sweden, when you got your first podium, you wanted more. What would you be happy with walking away this weekend?

KR:

I have to be on the podium speed at least, for sure we have to be on the speed - that's clear. But I also want to be on the podium at the end of the weekend and hopefully, we can also fight for the top place because it looks that it should be possible. I know, in the WRC, it's really difficult to win an event because you need to be perfect all the weekend and everything has to be right on your way but hopefully, we can manage to fight for the win this weekend.

Q:

Oliver, a bit of drama for you, even before the event got underway. Your normal co-driver, Aaron Johnston, can't take part, step in Seb Marshall, who's a top co-driver himself. Tell me how all that came about?

OS:

For sure it was big drama and it was very unfortunate for Aaron and sad because he would like to be a part of the journey on the first time in the WRC for sure. But Seb is the perfect replacement, I couldn't get a better co-driver. For sure, it's new excitement and I guess he's also very excited.

Q:

As you said it's also your debut in a World Rally Car, hugely exciting for you to take that step up but what was it like in the car when you were testing - how much of a difference was it from Rally2?

OS:

It's a dream come true, definitely. And on a rally like this, with beautiful conditions and snow it's one of my favourite surfaces, so for sure it's very, very exciting. The car was great. For sure we have to adapt the car to me and also the test... the cars are quite a big difference and it takes time to learn. But the main thing is aerodynamics, which takes time, and this weekend it's the perfect rally to feel it.

Q:

With Seb (Marshall) stepping into the car, how much difference has that made or are you not noticing a difference so far?

OS:

I only have to listen to the notes so it's not a huge difference. No, he's doing a great job. We had a fantastic recce, we're learning to know each other and it's working well so far.

Q:

What are the expectations for the weekend ahead?

OS

Well, [Andrea] Adamo said: "finish, enjoy" and definitely I will enjoy. We just had to drive and do our best and we will see how it goes. The main goal is to get experience, finish and we will see how it goes.

Q:

Monte seemed to be a bit up and down, and you were pretty hard on yourself. What mindset do you head into this rally with?

GG:

Pretty relaxed to be fair. We spent a few days before we were testing, mucking about ice-driving with Kristian [Sohlberg] so that was good fun, sending him into the ditch a few times, which always makes my life a little bit better. It was a good bit of fun so I'm pretty relaxed. Unfortunately, we didn't get the test we wanted, we had some issues with the car. But apart from that, to be honest, I was actually quite surprised how happy I was in the car straightaway. So that was positive. But it's quite a new surface for me, to be honest, so there is a lot to learn.

Q:

How many kilometres did you manage in testing before you got the issues?

GG:

I think we got only nine individual runs for that day so not a lot. We didn't get to try much but we got to try enough for me to feel comfortable at least.

Q:

Are the issues anything we need to be worried about moving into this weekend?

GG:

No, I don't think so, I hope not but I don't think so.

Q:

From the recce and from what you've seen on the stages and you don't have a huge amount of experience on this surface but what did you think of the stages themselves?

GG:

I thought the stages looked pretty epic, to be honest. Stage four looks like one of the best stages I've ever seen since I've been rallying so I'm looking forward to that one. But then again, like Kalle said before, there's quite a big mix sometimes where we're flat out and then we have quite a lot of technical sections. Then again, you can kind of see even in the technical sections, we're going to be able to carry a lot of speed.

Q:

Talk to me about the snowbanks because we're seeing some quite high snowbanks, higher than the cars in some places. When you are doing the recce, are you trying them to see if they're soft, hard, medium?

GG:

I think there was quite a lot of people trying them in the recce. Me and Oliver were talking before that it seemed like everyone was trying to send it into the snowbanks to see which ones were hard and which ones were soft and I think a few people got stuck in the snowbanks. Some places they're soft and some places you can lean on them so we tried to test them out a bit during the recce.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR:

Marco Giordo, Autosprint (ITA)

Q:

Many people think you're the favourite to win, what do you think about that?

KR:

I have seen that many people are saying that. It feels also quite nice that people are expecting that. I can't really do much for it, I just have to do my best like I said before.

FIA WRC2 CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Esapekka Lappi (FIN), Movisport

Jari Huttunen (FIN), Hyundai Motorsport N

Sean Johnston (USA), Saintéloc Junior Team

Q:

EP, welcome back to competition, you were missed in Monte. Difficult to sit home and watch it play out?

EL:

It wasn't, to be honest. It was different. Normally, when I've been watching All Live, you've always retired and you are in that mentality already that you are a bit pissed, or angry, or whatever. But now, when you know you are not going to be there, we watched it actually together with the kids and it was really interesting. The coverage was amazing, the rally was very interesting as well. I only had positive vibes, to be honest.

Q:

FIA WRC2 is a highly competitive field, in which you have great experience aside from your WRC advantages. What was it like to get back into a Rally2 car, how did it feel? How different is it from the WRC?

EL:

Clearly, you can feel on the car it's missing some parts. Probably the biggest thing we are missing is the active centre diff, and especially here on the long corners, it makes a big difference. Also, sometimes the engine feels a bit poor, especially when you lean on the bank on the exit, it kills the speed completely and you can't really have similar acceleration as the WRC. But for sure, you get used to it and the car feels, after two days of testing, quite good.

Q:

During those two days of testing how many kilometres did you knock up?

EL:

We did only 130 [kilometres], limited budget so we need to calm, calm.

Q:

But enough to get the full feel for it?

EL:

For sure, I will not use that as an explanation that I haven't driven enough.

Q:

What's the expectation this weekend EP?

EL:

I know the level of competition is high, Andreas is there, Jari as well. The other Finnish drivers as well but they are not in our class so we can kind of forget them. But it's tough, I know it's not a piece of cake to come here and beat them but I hope I can be in a fight.

Q:

And is there any more news for the rest of the season? Or is it just a one-off right now?

EL:

I hope not but like I've said before, we have some ideas of what to do. I would like to do a few rallies but there is no any realistic plans at the moment. Let's do this weekend first and let's start to plan properly.

Q:

Turning to Sean, I can imagine seeing the snow outside the windows and from what you've seen on the recce, you are incredibly excited but have you ever rallied in these conditions before?

SJ:

I'm very, very excited to be here. I have just one snow rally experience and that was in the FIA Junior World Rally Championship in 2019, Rally Sweden. At that point, I'd only done two loose-surface events ever so I had a lot to learn then. Now I have a much better feeling driving on gravel and it's somehow similar. But for sure, it's my first proper snow and ice rally with an all-wheel-drive car. A lot to learn but I'm loving it, we had a good test, the recce went well, the stages look gorgeous and I can't wait to get out there.

Q:

How are you finding the step-up to a Rally2 car?

SJ:

It's feeling more and more comfortable. For me, coming from a sports car racing background, having the rear wheels working with me is something I really enjoy. It was actually difficult for me in the R2 (Rally4) car with front-wheel drive, it feels more natural to be in this Rally2 equipment. The difficult thing for me is just the pace-notes. I've traditionally had an analytical approach to my pace-notes with too much information. Now with the extra speed, it's getting to the point that it's too much. And we know the dream, at some point, is to take the step into the World car when it's going to be even faster. The big challenge for me and Alex is to keep working on the notes and removing information and we'll see how we get on this weekend.

Q:

Have you been given any advice from anyone in particular?

SJ:

Pretty much anyone I run into I'm asking questions. I just had a long chat with EP [Lappi] before the press conference about stage conditions and what to expect on the second pass. I'm pretty much here acting as a sponge, taking in everything I can from anyone and everybody.

Q:

The plan moving forward, you mentioned altering pace-notes, for the rest of the season. What else?

SJ:

For me, the big thing is consistency and reducing the gap to the top guys. For sure, it would be unrealistic to expect me to have the same level of pace as somebody like Andreas [Mikkelsen] here. Last year was a COVID-shortened season and this is going to be my first proper season in all-wheel-drive equipment. I have a lot to learn but I feel like I'm taking steps forward and getting closer to that level of performance. Consistency and taking those small steps is certainly the goal.

Q:

Turning to Jari: great to see you in FIA WRC2 with the Hyundai team and here on Arctic Rally Finland. You've competed in Lapland before, a little while ago, but how are you feeling ahead of what is going to be an epic weekend here Jari-Matti?

JH:

I was doing this event in 2015 so I can't remember anything! But I think it's a really interesting rally and much more technical, so it should be really nice.

Q:

A lot of people will look at the images from around the world and think these are perfect conditions. You're a Finn, are they perfect conditions?

JH:

I think yes but in some places it's not so icy so maybe we can see some gravel there. But I still think it's a proper winter rally.

Q:

We've seen you do exceptionally well on snow rallies in the past but do you feel it's going to be an advantage for you coming here, do you feel you have a competitive edge over your rivals?

JH:

I'm always excited and a bit nervous, I don't know. It's difficult to say. I hope my pace will be okay but let's see.

Q:

Can you give us an idea of what the stages are like here? Are they technical? Are they fast and flowing? Or is it a mixture of both?

JH:

I can't remember the names but the first one, Sarriojärvi, is quite technical and also Mustalampi - that's technical. I like them both but it's not like normal Arctic stages, it's more technical stages.

FIA WRC3 CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Teemu Asunmaa (FIN)

Johan Kristoffersson (SWE)

Mattias Ekström (SWE)

Q:

Teemu, reigning national Finnish champion, with 11 starts and multiple class wins on the Arctic Lapland Rally, including this year's edition. You must be feeling confident heading into this, given your experience?

TA:

For sure it's very nice to be here. Okay, first time on a WRC rally in snow for me. We have a lot of experience in Lapland on the rally stages but I really, really wanted to come here and I am excited.

Q:

How good are conditions out on the stages? Is it perfect conditions?

TA:

Yeah, it's perfect. Okay, some places a little bit gravel after the January rally but it's very good conditions with a lot of snow and snowbanks over one metre, I think. It's very, very nice conditions.

Q:

We start the event with a very tough stage tomorrow night, 31 kilometres, it's a bit like Rally Finland with the gravel and the undulation but it's on snow. Tell me what's that stage like?

TA:

Sarriojärvi has been my favourite stage for many, many years. It's a very nice area, close to a military area and a lot of jumps and slow-speed corners and high-speed sections... I like that. I think it's the most difficult and tricky stage of the rally.

Q:

There are a lot of fantastic drivers within FIA WRC3 and FIA WRC2 this weekend. Do you feel that, with your experience here, you will be able to beat them all?

TA:

Okay, we have very good experience here. There are many Finnish guys here with Emil Lindholm and many others. But there are also Swedish drivers who are very good and know how to drive in snow. Let's see what happens.

Q:

Mattias, before we talk about the rally itself, let's take about the recce. We saw from social media that you had a minor excursion into a snowbank - in your mother's car! What has Mamma Ekström had to say about this?!

ME:

First I have to say thanks to mamma for lending the car. It wasn't so spectacular. I would be very proud to say it was some high-speed place but it was a slow corner before a long straight.

Q:

We haven't seen you compete on a WRC event since 2006 in Sweden. Why have you decided to come back and what made you decide to do this event?

ME:

I have been busy doing a lot of other things with DTM, World Rallycross and V8 Supercars. It has been many interesting projects. But Arctic Rally is one of the events I always dreamt about. Temperatures are changing and the climate is probably changing a bit and one day, I thought I would have a chance. And now that it has become a WRC event, I thought this would be the time and since I have a team to do it, I thought "why not".

Q:

What are your expectations heading into this event?

ME:

I'm here to have a lot of fun and for sure try and reach the finish, and enjoy every kilometre. I do expect Teemu [Asunmaa] and his Finnish friends will put up a really good pace. To battle with those guys, I think, won't be realistic so I will go and drive as fast as I can and see where I'm at. Priority one is definitely to go and have fun and enjoy the fantastic conditions.

Q:

Johan, what are your expectations coming into the Arctic?

JK:

Well, it's a bit tricky to know exactly what to expect in terms of results. For sure the R5 [Rally2] class in WRC2 and WRC3 looks really, really good competition so I am looking forward to that to see where we are in terms of pace because I think we have some of the best drivers in the world in the same car or in similar cars. So I'm looking forward to seeing that. I've done Sweden now a couple of times and it's always a bit easier when you come back to the same event with more or less the same stages and you know a little bit more what to expect. This will be completely new and I haven't driven rally competition since last year in Sweden. After doing some recce and stuff and seeing the stages, and having done the pre-event testing before, I am definitely looking forward to it. The rally looks so fun and I am happy to be here. I'm looking forward to the start tomorrow!

Q:

Obviously the last time you were competing on Rally Sweden, the conditions weren't so great, there wasn't a huge amount of snow and you come to this and it is a winter wonderland out there, what's the feeling like in the car when you've been testing?

JK:

It's nice and you really like the snow. Sometimes the snowbank can be to your help when you lean on them but sometimes, they can be really nasty if you get stuck. It feels a little bit like some extra life insurance on the side of the road when it's super high-speed. So I think that suits me well.

Q:

What's the plan for the rest of the season?

JK:

I will do Extreme E, that's the plan with Rosberg. From there on, I'm not really sure what's going to happen. Extreme E is only five events during the whole year so there is definitely a lot of free weekends for other racing. Let's see what happens, we'd definitely like to do more rallies but we'll see.