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CHASING SUCCESS ON SWEDEN'S SNOW-COVERED STAGES

Chasing success on the snow-covered stages of Rally Sweden, M-Sport's EcoBoost-powered Ford Fiesta WRCs will take to the second round of the FIA World Rally Championship next week.

After securing victory at the opening round of the season, the team are quietly confident of challenging for another strong result. Having proved its performance, the Fiesta secured seven fastest stage times at Rallye Monte-Carlo, but the Cumbrian squad have not let the taste of champagne distract them from the job in hand.

Completing two separate five-day tests in the lead-up to the only snow rally of the year, the team have worked on further improvements as well as developing the ideal set-up for Sweden's unique and challenging terrain.

Having historically performed well at the Scandinavian fixture, the Blue Oval's popularity is highlighted by M-Sport's range of Ford Fiesta rally cars accounting for 50 percent of the entry.

RALLY SWEDEN A UNIQUE WINTER RALLY

Unique to the FIA World Rally Championship, Rally Sweden is the only true winter event on the calendar. Let loose in their gravel specification, the Ford Fiesta WRCs will reach incredible speeds as studded tyres bite through the snow to capture grip on the hard ice below.

A traditional Rally Sweden can see temperatures as low as -20°C and hard-packed snowbanks which allow the crews to guide their cars through corners at tremendous speed. In recent years however, milder conditions have provided further challenges.

The warmer conditions see compacted snow replaced by loose snowbanks and there is an ever-present risk of becoming ensnared in their icy grasp. If that weren't enough, tyre management is also key. On ice-covered stages, tungsten-tipped steel studs are a driver's best friend but, as the temperatures hover above zero, protruding gravel can rip them from the tyres which result in a substantial lack of traction.

This year, the service park moves north to Torsby with stages deep in the frozen forests of both Sweden and Norway. Almost 58 percent of the route has been revised compared to 2016 and includes a brand-new stage – Hof-Finnskog – which has never before been seen in competition.

MALCOLM WILSON THE TEAM PRINCIPAL

Team Principal Malcolm Wilson was delighted with the team's performance at Rallye Monte-



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Carlo but remains aware of the challenges ahead and the work required to continue at the highest level.

Team Principal, Malcolm Wilson OBE, said:

"We've had a fantastic start to the season, but the hard work has not stopped. Making a return to the top-step of the podium was exactly what our team deserved, but we're fully aware that the hard work must continue if we want to achieve our objectives and regularly challenge at the head of the field."

"Rally Sweden is a unique event but it's also an event where we have historically performed well. Sébastien has won the event three times which is very impressive for a non-Scandinavian and Ott loves the high speed so I think we can be quietly confident of challenging for the podium positions once again."

"Sweden is notorious for close-fought competition, and success will not come without hard work and preparation. We know that we have a good base car in the Fiesta, but we are under no illusions about how closely the championship will be contested this year."

"We've had a brilliant start, but all four manufacturers have the potential to secure victory next week and we will need to be at the top of our game if we are to secure another podium result. It's what we are all aiming for, but it won't be easy."

OGIER AND INGRASSIA THE FOUR-TIME WORLD CHAMPIONS

When it comes to Rally Sweden, the Scandinavians reign supreme. Only two men have ever contradicted that rule, and Sébastien Ogier has done so on three separate occasions – making him the most successful 'outsider' in the history of the event.

Coming off the back of a dream start with the M-Sport team, Ogier and co-driver Julien Ingrassia could well secure another strong result next week and should never be discounted when it comes to the fight for the podium positions.

Previous starts: 7

Best result: 1st (2016, 2015 and 2013)

Sébastien Ogier said:

"We had a dream start to the season at Rallye Monte-Carlo, but we can't let that distract us. There is still a lot of work to do and Rally Sweden is a truly unique event."

"It's an event that I really enjoy and we reach incredible speeds on the snow and ice – something that will only increase with the new cars this year. That means that there are no margins for error and you have to be very precise. There are often just a handful of seconds separating each competitor, so every second really does count."

"If we can secure another podium result next week, it would be a fantastic start and surpass all of our expectations this early in the year. I see no reason why we can't be quietly confident of that, but at the same time it will require a lot of hard work behind the scenes."

"We've not yet seen everyone's true potential, and I'm expected a very exciting and very close-fought Rally Sweden."

TÄNAK AND JÄRVEOJA A DETERMINED NEW PARTNERSHIP

When it comes to Ott Tänak, one thing is for certain – he relishes high-speed rallies. Rally



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Sweden sees some of the highest speeds of the year and the Estonian will undoubtedly be one to watch.

A Swedish podium may have eluded Tänäk in the past, but he and co-driver Martin Järveoja have every chance of putting that right next week. His best result of fourth came in 2015 and since then he has gained a wealth of knowledge, experience and fortitude – all of which could see him break into the top-three.

Previous starts: 5

Best result: 4th (2015)

Ott Tänäk said:

"I'm really looking forward to Rally Sweden. It's one of my favourite events on the calendar and the high-speed stages give you such an adrenaline rush. This year, with the more powerful cars, it will be something very special.

"The stages are so much fun to drive – really fast and flowing, and very smooth. We need to be relaxed and focused and get into a good rhythm. I hope for nice ice conditions and to be in a position to fight at the top.

"The most important thing will be to have a good feeling from the start and then have a clean run. Hopefully the weather conditions will be in our favour and we can have some nice snowbanks to give us some extra support if needed.

"The lines are also very narrow and that's maybe the most difficult part of the rally. In case of fresh snow you need to make sure you stay in the line – otherwise you go from good grip to no grip at all!

"I can't wait to get back behind the wheel, and I think we have the potential to secure another good result."

ELSEWHERE IN THE M-SPORT TEAM

Elsewhere in the M-Sport team, Éric Camilli and Benjamin Veillas will team up alongside Teemu Suninen and Mikko Markkula as both pairings take to the wheel of the Ford Fiesta R5 in the FIA World Rally Championship's premier support series – WRC 2.

Going head-to-head with some of Scandinavia's finest competitors, Camilli will be keen to prove his potential whilst gaining the vital knowledge and experience to further progress his career.

Suninen made his Swedish debut at the event last year and impressed with a spectacular second place in class – just 14.6 seconds adrift of Elfyn Evans having outclassed his fellow Scandinavian rivals.

This year, the young Finn could well better that performance and certainly has the talent to challenge for victory.

Éric Camilli said:

"As the only winter rally on the calendar, Rally Sweden is special. I drove my first ever snow rally at this event last year and although it didn't end as we would have hoped, I really enjoy the sensation of driving on snow.

"There is still a lot for me to learn when it comes to winter rallying, but I am looking forward to the challenges ahead. Driving a winter rally gives you an incredible sensation of speed but our top priority will be continue to learn this unfamiliar surface.

"We have a test on Monday to get accustomed to the snow and to find a good set-up for the



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rally. Then, we'll just have to wait and see what happens. The competition will be really strong, but we go to every event with the intention of doing our best."

Teemu Suninen said:

"This will be just my second attempt at Rally Sweden. Last year we aimed only to gain experience and finished second in class which was a really nice result on our debut at the event.

"This year, it will perhaps be easier for me to start this rally. I have seen what kind of event it is, what challenges to expect and I know how best to prepare.

"We are now in a different location, facing some new stages, but the key challenges remain the same. We need to take care of the tyres, and maintain a good pace.

"It will be a challenge to improve on last year's result as there will be a lot of very talented drivers in Sweden, but it would be the perfect start to a very exciting season if we could achieve that."

ELSEWHERE

IN THE SERVICE PARK

Elsewhere in the service park, Elfyn Evans and Daniel Barritt take to the wheel of their DMACK-clad Ford Fiesta WRC as M-Sport's third nominated point-scorers.

Having secured three stage victories at last month's Rallye Monte-Carlo, the Brits have proven that they have the pace and could well spring another surprise next week. Last year, the Welshman had the better of his Scandinavian rivals and stormed to an impressive victory in the WRC 2 category.

Also taking to the wheel of the all-new Fiesta WRC is Mads Østberg and compatriot co-driver Ola Fløene. The Norwegians will be making their first appearance of the season next week, and consider the Swedish fixture very much a home event.

Østberg has an excellent track record on the snow-covered stages. Having contested the event six times with a world rally car, he has appeared on the podium five times and has the potential to continue that trend next week.

Other familiar faces include Lorenzo Bertelli and Simone Scattolin who will be taking to the wheel of last year's Ford Fiesta RS WRC in the new-for-2017 WRC Trophy.

In the WRC 2 category, a number of high-profile drivers will be taking to the wheel of the Fiesta R5 including Norwegians Anders Grøndal and Eyvind Brynildsen, ERC rally winner Alexey Lukyanuk, and former DDFT competitor Gus Greensmith.

Further down the field, one of Sweden's most talented youngsters, Daniel Röjssel will take to the wheel of a Ford Fiesta R2 in direct competition with Oscar Solberg – son of Henning – in a similar Fiesta R2.

MEET THE TEAM

MIGUEL CUNHA

Having joined the Cumbrian squad in 2000, Miguel Cunha has been an integral part of the team for the past 17 years.

Since playing a part in the team's consecutive manufacturer titles in 2006 and 2007, Cunha has progressed through the ranks and is currently employed as the Chief Technician to Sébastien Ogier and Julien Ingrassia.

In the lead up to Rally Sweden – one of the most challenging events for our technicians – we

caught up with Portugal's honorary Cumbrian.

How long have you been with M-Sport and what made you join the team?

I've always been quite a determined and ambitious person. Back in 2000 I wanted a new challenge, so I moved from my home in Portugal to work at M-Sport in the north of England.

At the time, I don't think I realised how much of a challenge it was going to be. I didn't speak any English, and that was definitely the hardest part – I had to learn very quickly.

I was quite home sick at times and, if I'm honest, there were a few times when I thought about going home. But that's not me; that's not what I'm about. I didn't give up and I'm so happy about that. I love my job and now I live in Cockermouth with my wife and my two young sons.

What would you consider your greatest achievement and fondest memory as part of the team?

That is an easy one – winning the manufacturers' title for the first time in 2006. We were in New Zealand and it was an amazing feeling. The whole team really came together, and we knew that we were the best – we had done it, we had won the championship. There was a pretty big party that night!

What does your job entail?

My role on events is to look after Sébastien Ogier's Fiesta. I'm the chief technician and it's my job to ensure that everything is running as it should. I have a team of technicians working alongside me and we work together to get the job done.

I work closely with the engineer to ensure everything that needs doing is done. It could be anything from a small set-up change, to replacing a full corner. No service is ever the same and you have to be organised and have a good structure in place to master any challenge.

In the workshop, it's a little bit different as I head up the builds and rebuilds of all the latest world rally cars. Last year I didn't travel to events – I stayed with the test team and learnt everything there is to know about these new cars.

It's a big job, but when you have a result like the one in Monte-Carlo last month, it's also a very rewarding one.

What is it like to work with the four-time World Champion?

In many ways he's just a normal guy, but in other ways you can see exactly why he's as good as he is. Sébastien and Julien are both really nice guys and straight away you could see the respect that they have for the team.

But there's a reason why they have won four world championships, and I think that's down to their attention to detail. In that respect, they remind me a lot Carlos Sainz. He was the same. Everything had to be just so, and it's that level of precision that delivers results.

What makes Rally Sweden so challenging for the technicians?

The cold; we service outside and trust me when I say that it is cold. Rally Sweden might not be known as a car breaker, but it definitely delivers the most challenging services for the technicians.

The simplest of jobs are made that much harder in those temperatures. You lose all feeling in your hands and that is a technician's worst nightmare!

- ENDS -



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