



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

2019 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

RALLY SWEDEN

Pre-event Press Conference
14 February 2019

Present:

Thierry Neuville (BEL), Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team
Ott Tänak (EST), Toyota Gazoo Racing World Rally Team
Esapekka Lappi (FIN), Citroën Total World Rally Team
Pontus Tidemand (SWE), M-Sport Ford World Rally Team
Marcus Gronholm (FIN), GRX Team

Q:

Thierry Neuville, how was the recce?

TN:

The conditions were quite nice. From our view, it was nice. Being first on the road, we are looking for proper ice and not much snow – this was the case. We have seen the temperatures increasing, so we don't know what to expect now. It should be OK on the first pass, but the second pass could be rutted with some gravel.

Q:

Thierry, good start to the season for you in Monte! Last year, you reigned supreme here on Rally Sweden. Do you have a good feeling going into the event?

TN:

We've always been strong here in Sweden. We won last year and we need to bring everything together this year – that's the management of the tyres, the strategy, everything. We are second on the road tomorrow, so the priority is to get a good position on Friday evening for Saturday. It's easy to make small mistakes here, if you go to the snowbank, even for 20 seconds or something then it can make it bad enough for the position on Saturday. This rally will be as challenging as always.

Q:

You came close to the title last year, what do you have to do differently this year?

TN:

I'm quite happy with the way we performed. There are many things which didn't go as well as they should have but this year, we tried to optimise everything with a very reliable car and no stupid mistakes. It will be a tough battle with Ott, Sébastien and maybe there could be some other drivers by the end of the year.

Q:

Ott Tänäk, were you happy with pace on Rallye Monte-Carlo?

OT:

Monte was good. In the end, we did everything we could. The team was up on the game and everything was working and the car performed on every possible condition. It was a shame about the puncture, but Thierry and Seb did a very good rally. It was a hard fight with them, we didn't know how it would end. But third on the road here is not so bad.

Q:

What's the strategy for the rally?

OT:

In a rally, there's always some strategy: we will think how much and where to use the tyres – it will be tough on the second loop. But still, this is the easiest rally [for the tyres]: we have only one option available, so we can only play with the use of the second spare, and management. The rest is just about the fast driving. The first loop will be OK, but the second loop can be difficult with some strange lines from the [national and historic] cars.

Q:

How was shakedown?

OT:

The car feels great. Shakedown was the best [conditions] we can have, we just need to use this option we have for the moment.

Q:

Esapekka Lappi, Monte proved a difficult start to the season and it could all turn around here in Sweden. How has the testing been going with the C3 on snow? Is it giving you confidence to be able to push for a good position here?

EP:

We did a lot of work during the two days. Actually I didn't do so much, I just drove... The mechanics did their job, so big thanks to them. We made some big changes, the car felt OK, but it was not my car. We adjusted a lot and, in the end, found quite a nice set-up. We were missing the ice on the test road, today we had ice and higher grip. We need to find [settings]. I'm quite happy.

Q:

You described the conditions on shakedown this morning as 'perfect'. Does that stretch to the actual stage conditions too?

EP:

Yes it was everything you could wish for on a winter rally.

Q:

What can you achieve here?

EP:

I don't really know. The question is for the conditions: how will they develop during the weekend? Tomorrow will be easier and Saturday the toughest day. If it gets really slushy, then it's not really fun like this: you can have unexpected things happening. Interesting...

Q:

Pontus Tidemand, you were already talking about competing in Sweden when we were half way through Rallye Monte-Carlo. Rallying at home for you in a WRC car must be a special feeling?

PT:

For sure it's one of the coolest cars in the world and the character of these roads is the best in the world. I'm looking forward to it. It's very tough, we just need to start.

Q:

You were smiling at the end of every stage in Monte-Carlo, will it be the same here?

PT:

For sure. We will try to do the same again here. We try our best and see how it goes. It's like Marcus [Grönholm]: we need Friday to get some mileage in the car and then we can see how it will be.

Q:

Are there any other events on the cards for you in the future?

PT:

I cannot tell anything, but for sure I hope for some more rallies with M-Sport.

Q:

You want to perform and get the best result possible. With that, does the pressure start to filter in?

PT:

I don't feel it. The level is so high, everybody is really quick. In some places we can have the speed, but for the complete week it will be tough. We will try to look and analyse what we are doing wrong and what we are doing good. That's all we can do on this one.

Q:

Marcus, after a nine-year absence, we see you return to competitive action in the WRC at an event where you took your first ever WRC win. Firstly, what does it feel like to be back?

MG:

It feels quite OK, but I can feel I have not been in the rally car and doing notes for nine years. It was a lot of braking and throttle in the wrong places. The notes were not OK, but I'll try to improve and enjoy tomorrow.

Q:

Is the relationship in the car with your co-driver Timo Rautiainen just as it ever was?

MG:

It's working OK, except Timo is always speaking about the rules! He is telling me all the time now: "You must do this and that..." It feels quite OK, but the right speed is not there. That's how it is.

Q:

That competitive nature will come out, how are you feeling?

MG:

I don't really feel we can do something fantastic, but for sure we need to finish in the Top 10. Maybe it goes better and better after Friday, maybe Saturday could be good – I have done these stages. Tomorrow I have not done, it's a bit more difficult. Let's see.

Q:

How does the car feel compared with when you were driving?

MG:

It's quite easy to drive and the aero package is the main difference. The engine and suspension is better, the whole package is quite nice.

Q:

What about the competition?

MG:

The level is high. There are four or five drivers who can win and I hope a lot of drivers can now match Seb so he is not winning all the time. I'm looking at you two... (Tänak and Neuville). They have to step up and do the whole season...

Q:

A question to everybody except Marcus, what's your favourite Grönholm moment?

EL:

I am fed-up with this car!

OT:

I can't remember any more the name of the team boss (Corrado Provera, Peugeot Sport) – I think he was quite famous... This is when Marcus told him three gears was enough.

TN:

I was also watching as a younger guy. The only rally I was able to join live was in Germany. There was some good moments, but also when you went off to the cow – this was disturbing him...

PT:

In Germany when Marcus was in the service park and he was asked how the conditions would be on the stages and he said: "I'm not the weather man!"

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Marco Giordo
AUTOSPRINT, Italy

Q

Marcus, you know this rally – what do you think of the conditions?

MG:

I'm not the weather man! It looked good on the first day of the recce, but then it changed and it's plus nine degrees, today it's plus degrees again. I don't know if it is good to be the first car. Maybe fourth or fifth car is the best place.

Petter Solberg
2003 FIA World Rally Champion

Q

Marcus, you told me you were going to win this rally – how will you do that?

MG:

Petter, you didn't listen to everything I said. I said I would win the grandpa class!

FIA WRC 2 PRO CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Mads Østberg (NOR), Citroën Total
Eerik Pietarinen (FIN), Škoda Motorsport

Q

Mads, we see you in the FIA WRC 2 Pro Championship this season. A new challenge for you! How is the Citroen R5? How was shakedown?

MO:

It's really good to be back. Things didn't look so positive in December and the start to the year has been a little bit different to what I normally have, but I'm really happy to have found this deal with Citroën to continue driving. It's a massive challenge with a new car in a new category and with new competitors. But I will meet this challenge with a lot of respect. I will try to improve on every stage and every race.

Q:

How does it feel to be in a R5 car after a World Rally Car last year?

MO:

It's a big step, no question. We have a job to do with the car – the car only started halfway through last season and it has never done anything on snow. So there is a lot of development work. I have good support from Citroen Racing and we're really pushing hard to improve the car, working a lot on the technical side. For me it's a massive step. I have done the step before from national events to R5, but it's massive now – much bigger than I remember. I was surprised in the first kilometres that the step was so big. You get used to the aero, that's the biggest thing for me – on the World Rally Cars [the aero] is so good, it's a surprise when you are in the slower car. You need to be more careful in the places. It's a big turnover for somebody with a small brain!

Q

We have seen you deliver great pace in Sweden within the WRC, does this make you favourite for this weekend?

MO:

The competition is really strong. There are some really good drivers – even a few world champions: it's hard competition. More drivers are probably able to win the FIA WRC 2 than the main WRC class. I'm sure the fight will be massive. I'm not in one with the car yet. I don't feel confident with the car, but I do feel confident with my driving. I will push and do everything I can to win, but I think it might be too early to start winning.

Q:

Eerik, you have a fantastic opportunity this season in the FIA WRC 2 Championship with Skoda. Sweden marks the first event of four European rallies for you, what - if any experience do you have on this surface? How have you been preparing for this event?

EP:

I have been driving on snow in Finland and I have watched some videos from this rally.

Q:

We saw you claim victory in the FIA WRC 2 Championship in Finland last year. You took a good result in Rally Estonia also and are the reigning Finnish Rally Champion. What would you say your target is in 2019?

EP:

My target this year is to get more experience and drive good.

Q:

You have recce'd over the past few days, what are the conditions like?

EP:

The stages look very good, very fast roads and very heavy ice.

FIA WRC 2 CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Takamoto Katsuka (JAP)

Johan Kristoffersson (SWE)

Q:

Taka, you took the win in the FIA WRC 2 category in 2018. Is confidence high for a repeat performance?

TK:

I will try to make a good result again, but there are lots of strong champions. Even at this table, there are lots of drivers who are very strong and I have a lot of respect for them. I have

confidence, but I need to respect everybody and the conditions will be difficult. But I will try to win!

Q:

You have a co-driver change for this season, Daniel Barritt alongside you now. How is that relationship working out?

TK:

Yes, of course it's nice. Last year in the rally car, I learn lots of bad Finnish words from Marko [Salminen] and now I learn bad English words from Dan! It's a joke. I learned a lot from Dan about Elfyn Evans' driving. I see Elfyn driving through his onboarders, so this helps a lot with Dan's information and advice. In the rally car, I am enjoying a lot.

Q:

In terms of improving your performance across the season, what areas do you feel you need to work on? What was the major learning point from the 2018 season?

TK:

Last year I learned a lot from Sweden, the Tarmac and the rough gravel rallies. This rally I need more experience. I try to go faster and push more, but you need to stay on the road. I have no stress, just enjoy the rally. I hope it will be fun.

Q:

Same for you Johan, no stress?

JK:

No. Not many!

Q:

Good to be back?

JK:

I am super, super happy to be back. I've lived in this town for four years, so to come here for this rally is very, very nice. I have a new car, new co-driver (Stig Rune Skjaermoen) and I'm here to really enjoy this.

Q:

How's the new car, team and co-driver working?

JK:

They are very, very good. It's all up to me. Stig is doing an awesome job – he's used to running with Ole Christian [Veiby] and the team has been with me in RX, but their background is in rallying. It's all up to me, I will try to learn step-by-step. I still have a long way to go.

Q:

Is there more pressure on you?

JK:

No. I put more pressure on myself. I am much more prepared than in years before. I have done six times more driving going into the event. I feel more comfortable in the car. There's more pressure on myself, but I'm here to enjoy the stages, the atmosphere and the nice car. The aim is to finish the rally. The competition in the FIA WRC 2 Championship is higher than before, so the result is hard to predict.

Q:

Will we see you out on more events?

JK:

There's no really news, but I can say I'm looking to doing more events – not only in WRC 2 and the World TCR championship, which will be my main event this year... And the Swedish Championship, but I need more experience for the Tarmac and gravel.

FIA JUNIOR WRC CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Tom Kristensson (SWE)

Sean Johnston (USA)

Q:

Sean, welcome to the FIA Junior WRC Championship! You have a background in sportscar racing and spent 2018 competing in the Opel Rally cup in Germany.

SJ:

First, I'm just extremely grateful to be here in Junior WRC. This atmosphere is fantastic. I came as a spectator in 2015, at a time when my sportscar racing was starting to not go so well. I planned to make the switch [to rallying] in 2016 but for sponsorship reasons, I had to step away for a couple of years. But when we had support, I put this straight into rallying. I have fallen in love with the sport.

Q:

What has been the hardest part of the process so far? How are you adapting to making pace-notes? I hear you have been training at a winter Rally school - tell us about that...

SJ:

The recce process is becoming more familiar. I understand how to make the notes and to drive them with commitment has certainly been a big process. In the Opel [last year] I went from having never driven to the podium on the second-to-last rally. I'm feeling confident, but then I don't have really have the experience. I did a three-day test in a rally school in winter conditions, but this was in a rear-wheel drive car. The goal for me is to do as many kilometres as possible.

Q:

You're doing JWRC and ERC this year?

SJ:

That's right. Looking at the regulations for the FIA Junior WRC, we understood we would be too old next year, so I said let's go for it – we have a full proper calendar and I'm loving it.

Q:

Tom, we have seen you compete in ERC previously, welcome to the Junior WRC! What made you decide to pick this championship?

TK:

I'm really happy to be here, this is the first time I competed here and have done a time at shakedown. I'm extremely proud to take part here.

Q:

Rally Sweden is the home event for you, does that bring with it extra pressure? What will your strategy be here?

TK:

I have just driven one rally in a front-wheel drive car on snow and ice and I didn't have good preparation for that one. I have quite less experience for this surface, but I'm feeling quite confident. I don't think it will be a problem, my plan is to get into it, then raise the tempo.

Q:

What is the objective for the year for you?

TK:

I'm hoping to make a good start, do a good rally and then raise the tempo. I need to learn from the beginning, I need to know I am able to drive a rally car. It will be fun to take in the atmosphere and everything.