

Fords Hirvonen named International Rally Driver of the Year

Monday, 07 December 2009

FIA World Rally Championship runner-up, Ford's Mikko Hirvonen, was honoured with one of motorsport's most prestigious awards in London last night (Sunday). The BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team driver was named International Rally Driver of the Year at the Autosport Awards in front of a star-studded audience of world champions past and present.

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Twenty-nine-year-old Hirvonen and co-driver Jarmo Lehtinen finished second in the 2009 world rally championship drivers' standings in a Ford Focus RS World Rally Car, missing the title by just one point after a thrilling fight on the final event in Britain. Hirvonen's campaign, which included a run of four consecutive rally victories, was rewarded by the readers of Britain's Autosport Magazine and Autosport.com website who named him the year's top rally driver.

Hirvonen was presented with the trophy by fellow Finn and Ford's 1981 world champion Ari Vatanen during a ceremony at London's Grosvenor House Hotel. World champions in attendance included Formula 1 stars Jenson Button, Lewis Hamilton and Damon Hill and former World Touring Car champion Andy Priaulx.

After receiving his trophy, Hirvonen said: "I'm a little bit speechless because I didn't expect to hear my name read out. I'm honoured that the British fans and readers of Autosport voted for me and I can't thank them enough. I receive this award on behalf of myself and Jarmo. We are a team and he deserves this just as much as me. It's a proud moment for both of us. It was frustrating to finish second by just a single point, but it was a great season and missing out by so little makes me want the title even more next year."

Joining Hirvonen at the ceremony were Ford's Ian Slater (Vice President, Communications and Public Affairs, Ford of Europe) and Gerard Quinn (Senior Motorsport Manager), plus Malcolm Wilson (Team Director) from M-Sport.

"This Autosport Award of International Rally Driver of the Year is wonderful recognition for Mikko, at the end of such an exciting season in which he showed unrivalled consistency. In fact, Mikko missed the podium only once. With this award he will be more determined than ever to go one better in the 2010 championship," said Slater.

The Autosport Awards began in 1982 as an independent way of recognising achievement in motorsport by giving magazine readers the opportunity to honour top achievers in various fields. There are now 13 categories, covering national and global motorsport. Hirvonen is the seventh Finn to claim the International Rally Driver Award.