

Hirvonen gives M-Sports Fiesta debut IRC victory

Saturday, 23 January 2010

Mikko Hirvonen has given M-Sport's Ford Fiesta S2000 a debut victory on the opening round of the Intercontinental Rally Challenge, the 78th Automobile Rallye Monte-Carlo, which finished in the early hours of Saturday morning.

The 29-year-old from Finland and co-driver Jarmo Lehtinen, held the lead from the opening stage on Wednesday to claim their first win on the legendary event.

Although Sebastien Ogier closed to within 38.3 seconds of them with his seventh stage victory on Friday evening, the Peugeot 207 driver's bid for a second successive win in the Principality was cruelly ended when he retired on the road section heading to the penultimate stage.

Ogier's retirement, the result of a broken alternator pulley shaft, elevated Skoda's Juho Hanninen to second place with Nicolas Vouilloz claiming third on a one-off outing for the Czech firm. The result means Skoda tops the IRC Manufacturers' standings over M-Sport by four points.

Hanninen held second at the start of the day but fell behind Ogier on the first stage of Friday evening when his choice of winter tyre proved too conservative for the conditions, which were drier in parts than expected.

Stephane Sarrazin was the lead Peugeot 207 driver home in fourth. Having lost time with a puncture and a crash into a snow bank earlier in the event, Sarrazin had an anxious wait at the first service halt in Monaco on Friday afternoon while his PH Sport mechanics rushed to replace a broken front differential.

Their efforts were rewarded when he went fastest on stage 13, despite the lack of a functioning first gear. He was quickest again on the last stage of the event.

Jan Kopecky, the runner-up in last year's IRC Drivers' standings, dropped out of contention with a puncture on the very first stage.

A second puncture on day two added to his woes but he gradually fought back to claim fifth and four Drivers' championship points. With the 2009 champion, Kris Meeke, crashing his Peugeot UK 207 S2000 on Friday's first stage, Kopecky's recovery could prove decisive as the season progresses.

Briton Guy Wilks made it four Skoda Fabia Super 2000s in the top six, with a solid drive to sixth overall. He bemoaned poor tyre choice and a lack of experience of driving his Fabia on asphalt for his failure to challenge higher up the order although he achieved his aim of a points finish.

Portugal's Bruno Magalhaes and Frenchman Jean-Sebastien Vigion completed the points scorers with seventh and eighth respectively in their Peugeot 207s.

Like Ogier, Franz Wittmann failed to go the distance when he damaged his 207 hitting a wall on stage 13. Toni Gardemeister withdrew heading to the day's opening stage with engine damage sustained in a crash on Friday afternoon.

Clio R3 European Trophy competitor Kris Princen won the IRC 2WD Cup in 11th overall after surviving a puncture on Friday evening. Young Corsican Pierre Campana took an impressive second in class on his Monte Carlo Rally debut after making repairs to a broken water expansion tank following the penultimate stage.

Hirvonen ran on Pirelli tyres throughout the Monte Carlo event, sealing the Italian company's first overall victory in the IRC series.

The 78th Monte Carlo Rally was characterised by an unprecedented 14 hours of spectacular live television coverage from Eurosport, allowing viewers all over the world to see the action directly as it happened.

Driver Quotes

"It's always been a dream of mine to win the Monte Carlo Rally. I have to say the car has been perfect from start to finish thanks to the mechanics who worked so hard to get everything ready. It was never easy but thanks to an excellent job from the team we were able to win having led from the start. I've really enjoyed this experience and I'd love to come back again. It was a shame Sebastien Ogier had his technical problem because it was a great battle but it also came as a relief that he stopped. We had a perfect tyre from Pirelli. I am very happy." Mikko Hirvonen, first overall

"Of course it's good to get some points but it's disappointing we lost the fight to Ogier. But I am happy with second place following a difficult rally in difficult conditions. I am very pleased to have got to the end. If anything it was even harder than last year but I think we've improved and the car has improved so we can look forward to what I am sure will be a very strong season for us. I would like to congratulate Mikko for a fantastic job." Juho Hanninen, second overall

"My aim was to finish the Monte Carlo Rally for the first time and this is what I did. To do this with Skoda is also very good so I am very happy. It was not easy and perhaps I did not always have the speed or the confidence I wanted to be able to push. But I did not make any big mistakes and to be on the podium on this rally is a big achievement." Nicolas Vouilloz, third overall

Results

- 1 Mikko Hirvonen/Jarmo Lehtinen Ford Fiesta S2000 4h32m58.5s
- 2 Juho Hanninen/Mikko Markkula Skoda Fabia S2000 +1m51.4s
- 3 Nicolas Vouilloz/Benjamin Veillas Skoda Fabia S2000 +3m19.1s
- 4 Stephane Sarrazin/Jacques Julien Renucci Peugeot 207 S2000 +7m25.5s
- 5 Jan Kopecky/Petr Stary Skoda Fabia S2000 +8m48.7s
- 6 Guy Wilks/Phil Pugh Skoda Fabia S2000 +9m24.5s
- 7 Bruno Magalhaes/Carlos Magalhaes Peugeot 207 S2000 +9m45.4s
- 8 Jean-Sebastien Vigion/Stephane Prevot Peugeot 207 S2000 +13m33.5s
- 9 Jaroslav Orsak/Karel Vajik Skoda Fabia S2000 +21m16.6s
- 10 Andrej Jereb/Miran Kacin Peugeot 207 S2000 +25m26.1s