



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

2021 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

RALLY FINLAND

Pre-event FIA Press Conference
30th September 2021

Present:

Kalle Rovander – Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT
Craig Breen – Hyundai Shell Mobis WRT
Gus Greensmith – M-Sport Ford WRT
Esapekka Lappi – RTE-Motorsport

Q:

Kalle, a dominant win on the Acropolis Rally. Has that amazing result settled in and are you bringing that confidence to your main event?

KR:

Of course it was a really nice event for us. I think it didn't take long to really settle in, it just felt really good after it. Now we are focusing on this event.

Q:

It is a huge event and very much your home event. We've missed it for a year because of Covid. What was it like seeing the stages again and understanding you will be in a World Rally Car on this stages for the first time?

KR:

Of course it feels really good. It feels like it has been a longer break than only one year. But of course the conditions are a bit different, it's not summer time any more. But the stages still look really nice and enjoyable.

Q:

It looks beautiful in all the autumn colours and the temperatures are a lot cooler than we are used to for Rally Finland. How does that effect the surface and what should we expect to see this weekend?

KR:

If it's dry like this, it's not such a big difference. Now the ground is more compact, we do not have so much loose gravel than in the summer time when we have a bit more heat and dust. I would say if it's not raining it should be not so different. Of course this year we have a lot of new stages and that is always a bit different and quite difficult with the new notes on a fast rally like this.

Q:

Talk to me about rallying in dark like, which we've never seen on Rally Finland before. What is that going to be like and how much have you tested in the dark?

KR:

Driving in the dark is completely different. It's quite a big difference even if you know the stage, and I think here it will be on a fast rally with a lot of crests and fast corners it's not so easy to trust the notes in the dark, because of course you cannot see everything even with the really good lights we have on the car. Normally when we drive in the dark it's winter time and you can see the light shining from the snow banks and it's much brighter. But without any snow it will be really proper dark. And I think Oittila will be a really challenging stage in the darkness. You have no room for mistakes there.

Q:

After Acropolis and coming here to your home event everyone is pinning the win on your shoulders already, and we haven't even start the rally. Do you feel that pressure or do you push it to one side?

KR:

Of course I feel it a bit but I'm not thinking about it too much. I know it's just a rally just like any other rally. I try to think that way and just try to do the same job as on all the rallies. We always try to do as good a job as possible. Of course it gives us a small boost to have all our friends and family here watching who can't normally come to the rallies outside of Finland. Lots of fans and support and of course it feels nice.

Q:

Craig, there's some pressure on you as well. We've seen you on the podium here before. You were second in Estonia and you did so well in Ypres. What can you achieve this weekend?

CB:

Yeah, obviously it's been a good run of months. Last couple of events have been really good. Honestly I'm not used to being in the car so often, so doing two events in a row first of all was nice between Estonia and Ypres, and getting two podiums was obviously better again. But I'm looking forward to the rally. For some unknown reason these fast gravel rallies tend to go well for me. Very like back home, with our narrow Tarmac roads. I've no idea why I tend to get well on rallies like this, but I'm looking forward me. It's a different shape of a rally being in autumn time. The challenge is there and it will definitely be an exciting weekend.

Q:

What kind of challenges do you think rallying this time of year will bring for you?

CB:

For sure doing the stages in darkness is going to bring a whole new element. It's something I've often thought about over the years, what would it be like to do a stage in Finland in darkness, and lo and behold we have it now. Like Kalle said, we're used to doing this on this profile of road in Sweden and on the Arctic Rally this year we had quite a lot. But when you don't know the reference to shine the lights off it's a whole different challenge. You are shining the lights into complete open space and you are going through the fields and over the top of crests and you have nothing to judge the lights off, it's incredibly tricky. In the forest sections it's a bit easier, you've got the trees sometimes to make a reference. For sure the last stage tomorrow evening and perhaps again on Saturday evening we could have a bit of darkness in the latter stages. It's going to be a big challenge and new stages as well, so a different shape of rally this year definitely.

Q:

Have you tested in darkness?

CB:

No. We weren't given that option. I don't know why. But we weren't able to test in the darkness.

Q:

The schedule here is relentless: stage after stage after stage back to back. Are there any particular stages that stand out as more of a challenge than you expected?

CB:

I think the two new stages on Saturday evening. The last two stages of the loop. They have quite a different profile to the others. A lot of it is based in the forest and it all looks very similar and no one has any experience of it from previous years, so I think they are going to be two key stages. And tomorrow especially Oittila in the dark is going to be a big challenge. Only one run through it and we don't even get a run through it before in the daylight. You have to have the choke out on the first run over and commit to your notes. They are definitely going to be the key points

Q:

What can you tell us about next year? There are so many rumours. What could be lined up for you next year?

CB:

Honestly not much more than what it was in Ypres. Things are progressing definitely. I think there's a bit of light at the end of the tunnel now. I would be hoping in the next... it's got less than months anyway, it's not quite at days yet. But in the next couple of weeks things should be a little more clear. I feel positive and that's the most important thing.

Q:

Gus, lots of changes in the addition we see this year, and your favourite stage Päijälä has been reversed this time. Is it still as good in reverse?

GG:

It's not quite as flowing, so probably not quite as nice, But for sure it's a lot faster in this direction. We've been watching some of the old videos from 2016 when Kris [Meeke] was driving and I got my co-driver Chris to translate Kris's pace notes to get some little tips. It looks brilliant. But then again so do a lot of the other stages.

Q:

It's the 70th edition. What do you think of the route overall?

GG:

Busy. Tricky, especially in the two Saturday afternoon stages but they are completely new for everyone. Then again we finish the rally and then we also finish this generation of rally cars on gravel, which doesn't really get better than that

Q:

What does that feel like, with the change in regs for the cars? Is there a bit of sadness?

GG:

Mostly sadness, yeah. These cars are pretty good, pretty special. The new cars are also exciting but as a driver I don't think it gets much better than what we are driving now.

Q:

What about your hopes. You have good experience in Finland and things have been improving for you. What do you think you can take away from this one?

GG:

It's hard to say. We didn't get to test at all for the event, so the key thing is to decide how quick we can get up to speed. They call it the grand prix rally because everything is separated by tenths and losing seconds here is an issue, so if we are not up to speed straight away it's going to be a very tough rally. We'll do what we can.

Q:

Esapekka, it's good to see you in a World Rally Car this weekend. It's been almost a year since you've been in one. How are you feeling about being back and back at your home event?

EP:

If feels great. I'm not really sad like these guys are! It will be the last gravel rally, but I'm just really excited to drive this generation of cars once again.

Q:

You've had the ultimate success here, you've been on the top step of the podium. But being outside of a World Rally Car for a while, some might say they don't feel quite as fresh. What are your expectations for the weekend?

EP:

I believe I need to be realistic what to expect. For tomorrow I believe we are going to lose a little bit. I need to get used to the speed from the fresh road, from the pace notes. It's easy to do a good speed on a test road which you know. But to move that speed into a proper stage is not that simple. Maybe tomorrow it will go like that and then hopefully after a good night's sleep I will understand more in my head how to do it and then on Saturday we will be on good form.

Q:

Jari-Matti Latvala has already said he doesn't want any pressure on you. Are you putting any pressure on yourself? You put your helmet on and things change, right?

EP:

Yeah, that's normally the case. But I try to be a bit of an older guy now... Mature that is maybe the correct word. I try to be not stupid, let's say it like this.

Q:

What are you thought on the route and what Rally Finland has to offer?

EP:

It's hard to say anything more than the guys have said. Sunday is the same as before. Saturday we will have good new stages that are a lot more technical, a lot of loose gravel. The road are narrow roads now. It makes things a bit more interesting and definitely when it will be in the darkness, when it's damp and the dark forest... if feels like the dark forest and the damp road is sucking the light off of you. As Kalle said the visibility is not so clear, but still you should be bloody fast on these stages! That mixture doesn't sound really enjoyable, but we try to enjoy it definitely. I'm sure it will be a good show.

Q:

There are lots of rumours about you next year. We hear you could potentially be sharing a seat with Sébastien Ogier at Toyota. What can you tell us?

EP:

Nothing.

Q:

What would you like to be doing next year?

EP:

For sure I would like a Rally1 car

Q:

All season or would a partial season suit you?

EP:

I don't care. Half a season, seven races, nine races, a full season. You know, after zero races it feels quite good to have at least one. I would be happy for everything that comes up.

Q:

Finally, the bit at the end is 21. You've all got him a present, right?

CB:

21, oh my God. I've got 10 years on you...

EP:

You are the oldest here.

CB:

No, you are the oldest. When were you born?

EP:

1991.

Q:

How old are you, Craig?

CB:

31. If I say it quiet maybe no one will hear.

FIA WRC2 CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Teemu Suninen – Movisport

Q:

Teemu, welcome back to the championship. You have decided to leave M-Sport recently and you are here in a Volkswagen. How have the last few weeks been after that decision.

TS:

I really must say it's been quite challenging. I've been super-hurried to sort out everything and get everything fixed for this rally and the upcoming rally. But I still have to say I've been enjoying every minute because now we are able to do all the things how I want to do them. We have been able to prepare quite well for the rally. We have been able to have a few test days and prepare the car for the rally and test new parts. I can be quite confident for the rally.

Q:

That's good because it is your home event and the biggest for you. But it will be very different in a brand-new car and the route has changed a little bit as well. But exciting times?

TS:

Yeah, I'm really looking forward to see what I can do with the new car. The Volkswagen is really different to drive so I have to reset my brains and try to learn a new driving style. It's been taking some time, but we've had some days to adapt to it and hopefully I have learnt all the critical things from Volkswagen and learn the way to drive it correctly. And of course Rally Finland after a one-year break is a big challenge for all the drivers because half the stages are new ones.

Q:

How many kilometres did you manage to do on the test this week?

TS:

Around 200 kilometres. We tested for three days. I wanted to have the first test day quite early because I wanted to have really before the rally to give some time for the brains to adapt to the new car and adapt to a new way of driving and thinking.

Q:

And it is a new way of driving, isn't it? You've been back and forth between a WRC and WRC2 car this year and it does take a bit of a shift in thinking.

TS:

Yeah, exactly. I would say the thoughts between an R5 and WRC cars are built in the same philosophy so you are pretty much driving in the same style. But this time it's a different brand, the car is made differently. So it needs a totally new driving style. It will be a big challenge for me.

Q:

Talk about driving in the dark on Finland, here with super-high speeds...

TS:

I would say the challenge will be the open fields. All the corners are hidden behind crests so you have to have really precise pace notes to push the car to the limits. Especially when there are dark stages on the Friday, on the first day, it makes it even more challenging when we are still getting used to the cars and the pace notes.

Q:

At the next event in Spain you are with Hyundai. What happens after then and what's happening in the future?

TS:

Honestly I don't know. We have to see how this rally goes and how I can drive in Spain. I believe if we can make good results we can have quite a future. If not, I don't know what we are going to do. I just have to focus on this rally and do my best.

Q:

You don't look worried. I think you know what's going to happen...

TS:

I have prepared quite well for this rally well and feel quite confident. But still anything can happen in rallying, especially when the car is new and I have a lot to learn. But I have to do my best and have to enjoy my rally.

FIA WRC3 CHAMPIONSHIP & FIA JUNIOR WRC CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Mikko Heikkilä

Pepe López

Q:

Mikko, it's been fascinating to watch you this year in WRC3, on the Arctic Rally and in Estonia as well. Great results but what have you thought of your performances?

MH:

The result was good in Lapland and Estonia, but our speed wasn't so high compared to the top guys. But that is one thing I want to improve.

Q:

Is this your first Rally Finland?

MH:

This is my first time, yes.

Q:

How has that happened, given that you have competed on the Finnish championship?

MH:

Maybe money is the reason!

Q:

Good answer! It must be pretty special to compete here this weekend.

MH:

Yeah, I'm really excited and looking forward to it

Q:

Out in the forests it looks spectacular this time of year. What's it going to be like on the rally itself and what do you think of the stages?

MH:

The stages are really nice and OK, it will be quite dark and maybe slippery but that doesn't matter. We have had some good kilometres last week and we had a good Finnish championship rally and we had a good practice there, so I don't see any problem.

Q:

What are you hoping for in terms of a result? What's realistic.

MH:

Top three will be something I want. But we'll see. The competition at this level is quite high and it's a long rally. We have to be clever and try to be in the top three.

Q:

As you say, money is always a thing. Do you have plans for next year yet?

MH:

Yeah, we have some plans and of course I would like to drive some WRC rallies but we'll see. We have plans but nothing sure yet.

Q:

A good result here would help...

MH:

Yeah, that's why we're here.

Q:

Pepe, how are you feeling about the weekend?

PL:

It is one of the rallies you always want to race, so I'm really excited to get into the stages and see what we can do.

Q:

You had a really good result in Sardinia on gravel this year, but it is very different here in Finland. What are you aiming for here?

PL:

We know Rally Finland is one of the big rallies on the calendar and we like to go to this place and learn as much as possible. That is why we are here. But also I would like to have a good pace and try to send any messages to any managers of what we are able to do.

Q:

Have you managed to test ahead of the event?

PL:

Actually last week we competed in the Finnish championship, but we had some problems on the rally, we were not able to test all the things we wanted. But OK, we had a one-day test. So I think it will be enough for the rally and in the shakedown we will try to adjust the car.

Q:

Driving in the dark will be quite an experience. How are you feeling about that?

PL:

We are excited for sure. Also for the co-drivers it will be really challenging. I'm looking forward to this rally. For me it's like a kind of dream to do Rally Finland, so I will try to enjoy it and not be afraid.

Q:

What are the plans for next season?

PL:

Nowadays we are working on it. We have some options, but we have to wait a bit to secure the programme.

Q:

But it is sounding positive, yes?

PL:

Well, I still don't know for sure. We are in Rally Finland this week and we will try to get a good result and that's where my mind is right now.

ENDS