**STAGE FLASH**

**Date: 20 April 2023**

**Day: 1 Flash N°: 1**

**Special stage: Shakedown Okić Distance: 3.65 km**

**Weather: Warm and dry**

**Road conditions: Dry but muddy sections in some corners**

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**Car #17. SÉBASTIEN OGIER/VINCENT LANDAIS (TOYOTA GR YARIS RALLY1)**

Ogier, the world championship leader after three rounds and the 2021 Croatia Rally winner, is the first of the Rally1 drivers through the stage and stops the clocks in a time of 1m58.3s. “We are all trying to go forward. It’s going to be a tough week for all of us. But I think and I’m sure actually that there was no one who had more rallying in his blood than Craig, so for sure he’s happy to see us racing this weekend. We do it for him, that’s the only thing we can do.”

**Car #11. THIERRY NEUVILLE/MARTIJN WYDAEGHE (HYUNDAI I20 N RALLY1)**

Carrying a special tribute livery to Craig Breen, the work of the Hyundai team’s number one test mechanic, Neuville takes 1m57.8s to complete his first pass of the 3.65-kilometre Shakedown run. “We are all very sorry for what happened. It’s going to be a tough weekend for everybody but as a team we need to be strong, as a rally family we need to be strong and we need to keep on going, and it’s what Craig wanted definitely, that’s for sure. It won’t be an easy weekend, so I think we have to try to enjoy it. That was one of the messages Craig gave to us, so we’re going to try to enjoy this weekend and hopefully bring home a good result for Craig. That’s the target.”

**Car #69. KALLE ROVANPERÄ/JONNE HALTTUNEN (TOYOTA GR YARIS RALLY1)**

After setting a 1m55.7s on his first run, Finland’s defending world champion says: “It’s going to be really difficult. I’m doing just fine at the moment but I think it’s the most important thing that everybody is here to drive for Craig, that’s quite clear why we are all here and why we are doing it.”

**Car #8. OTT TÄNAK/MARTIN JÄRVEOJA (FORD PUMA RALLY1)**

Fastest on the first run through shakedown in a time of 1m54.7s, the Estonian uses his post-stage interview to recall a visit to Craig Breen’s family in Ireland last Sunday. “I know it’s difficult, it’s demanding and it’s so hard for all of us. It’s empty inside and it’s eating us alive. It’s tough but I promised to give a smile to Jackie [Breen, Craig’s mother]. She had so much positive energy when I was there last Sunday. They are such lovely people. I was really happy to be there with them. Thank you so much for that. We keep going and so do you.”

**Car #33. ELFYN EVANS/SCOTT MARTIN (TOYOTA GR YARIS RALLY1)**

The 2021 Croatia Rally runner-up is slow to complete the stage – his time of 2m44.0s is evidence of that – with an unspecified technical problem. “I’m sorry I have to go,” he tells WRC All Live’s Molly Pettit at the stage stop line. “We have something to sort.”

**Car #4. ESAPEKKA LAPPI/JANNE FERM (HYUNDAI I20 N RALLY1)**

Also running the special Craig Breen tribute livery on his Hyundai, Lappi takes 1m55.9s to complete his first Shakedown run. “The car looks amazing, the guys did an amazing job to make it look like this in such short notice. I was a bit… you know I said to Janne I’m shaking on the finish line, not because I pushed hard but because… every one of us takes it in different ways and for me it’s tough, for me it’s tough.”

**Car #18. TAKAMOTO KATSUTA/AARON JOHNSTON (TOYOTA GR YARIS RALLY1)**

Toyota’s Japanese development driver takes 1m58.0s to reach the finish following his first pass of Shakedown. “I’m really sad. He has been a really good friend. I have not been knowing him for long, for no time at all, but still he as always friendly, giving me many tips and things. I have an Irish co-driver and we were chatting quite a lot. We have to drive for Craig for as long as possible and this is what he would have wanted.”

**Car #7. PIERRE-LOUIS LOUBET/NICOLAS GILSOUL (FORD PUMA RALLY1)**

After clocking a 1m56.9s, Loubet says: “For sure it will be very different from the rest of the rally. Everybody thinks about the same thing. For sure it’s terrible but we have to do the job and I think he would do the same so we have to do it.”

**Car #20. OLIVER SOLBERG/ELLIOTT EDMONDSON (ŠKODA FABIA RS RALLY2)**

Top of the WRC2 points prior to the Croatia Rally, Solberg posts a 2m00.3s best on his second run: “For sure it’s going to be a very difficult weekend, emotionally difficult for everyone, especially for the guys at Hyundai I hope all the best for them. Keep together, keep strong and keep focused. Try to keep focused all the weekend.”

**Car #21. YOHAN ROSSEL/ARNAUD DUNAND (CITROËN C3 RALLY2)**

Rossel’s first Shakedown run takes the French driver 2m04.8s to complete. “I am happy to come back in WRC, the car improved a lot for the feeling and of course I think of my friend but [I have a job to do] and we are to take a lot pleasure and I think that is the most important.”

**Car #22. EMIL LINDHOLM/REETA HÄMÄLÄINEN (ŠKODA FABIA RS RALLY2)**

With a 2m03.8s after his first pass, Lindholm says: “I like this rally, no doubt, but it’s not going to be easy this week. Everybody liked him a lot, he was one of the characters of the service park. I was happy to know him, we did a few rallies in the ERC in the same team and I will always be grateful for all the help he gave me. This weekend we will rally for him.”

**Car #23. GUS GREENSMITH/JONAS ANDERSSON (ŠKODA FABIA RS RALLY2)**

The WRC2 winner on Rally Mexico last month, Greensmith’s first effort is a 2m02.1s. Having partnered Breen at M-Sport in 2022, Greensmith says: “Missing my friend, missing the laughs we had, chats, just generally good times, he wouldn’t have wanted us to do anything else but rally. We’ll enjoy it.”

**Car #24. NIKOLAY GRYAZIN/KONSTANTIN ALEKSANDROV (ŠKODA FABIA RS RALLY2)**

Gryazin’s first run through Shakedown is in a time of 2m03.3s. “It’s tough for everyone but it is like it is. About the Shakedown, I speak about the rally also, Shakedown was okay, we need to take care, but it was okay.”

**Car #25. ADRIEN FOURMAUX/ALEXANDRE CORIA (FORD FIESTA RALLY2)**

Breen’s former team-mate at M-Sport, Fourmaux’s best Shakedown time is a 2m02.2s. “We Craig we have to try to enjoy a lot the rally because it was what he was learning for me actually. He was always doing that on each drive and we try to do that for his memory.”

**Car #26. SAMI PAJARI/ENNI MÄLKÖNEN (ŠKODA FABIA RS RALLY2)**

Setting a time of 2m00.9s, Pajari says: “It’s quite obvious [what we are all feeling]. I would still like to think that we can have a nice rally and a nice feeling. At least, let’s say, I am quite happy with my car, that’s one positive thing. Step by step we go ahead.”

**Car #27. ERIK CAIS/PETR TĔŠÍNSKÝ (ŠKODA FABIA RS RALLY2)**

Czech driver Cais sets a personal best of 2m01.9s on his second pass of the Shakedown stage. “I’m feeling quite okay, it was quite slippery, more than I expect but never mind, this weekend will be about one big rally family racing for Craig,” Cais says.

**COMMENTS**

The third Croatia Rally to count for the FIA World Rally Championship is go with crews completing their timed runs through the 3.65-kilometre Shakedown run, located close to the ancient town of Okić, this morning. Warm and dry conditions greeted the crews with drivers paying heartfelt tributes to Craig Breen at the finish of the stage. Kalle Rovanperä/Jonne Haltunnen were fastest in a time of 1m52.8s with Ott Tänak/Martin Järveoja and Sébastien Ogier/Vincent Landais setting an identical second-best time of 1m53.6s. However, stage times were very much secondary to what has already proved an emotional start to the fourth round of the WRC season. Erik Cais headed Oliver Solberg and Yohan Rossel in WRC2. Meanwhile, the only driver with an apparent technical problem was Elfyn Evans, although the two-time WRC runner-up did not explain the nature of his issue at the end of his first Shakedown run, which he completed in a time of 2m44.0s. The Ceremonial Start, when a series of tributes will be paid to Breen and his family, is due to begin at 18:30 CET at the National and University Library in Zagreb.

**ENDS**

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