



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

2021 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP RALLY CROATIA

Post-event FIA Press Conference
April 25, 2021

Present:

Sébastien Ogier (FRA) – Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT
Elfyn Evans (GBR) – Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT
Thierry Neuville (BEL) – Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team
Jari-Matti Latvala – Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT

Q:

Let's come to you first Sébastien, and congratulations on winning the first Rally Croatia in the WRC after what was a thrilling final stage, the Wolf Power Stage was pretty amazing. Tell us what it was like to find out you had sealed that win?

SO:

If you want to know the truth I didn't believe it was possible any more. But you also know that never give up and always try. First of all I wanted to at least defend my second place and score maximum points in the Power Stage, that was my plan. But I told myself it was not enough because Elfyn was just flying on the first pass through in the morning. But this stage was just crazy, it was so narrow, quite dirty on the second pass, a couple of jumps and it's definitely a place where differences can happen, more than on a circuit-style stage like the long one in the loop. At the end we just made it for 0.6s, which is just nothing. Of course in the moment I feel for Elfyn because he has done a good job this weekend but I think we didn't stole either this victory. We have been pretty strong the whole weekend. Some issues have slow us down at some points but the global level performance was good so I think we can be happy with that. And the most important is it's a one-two for the team this weekend and, at this stage in the season that's very important.

Q:

And you go into the championship lead, which is very important?

SO:

I don't know!

Q:

Yeah, you do.

SO:

I'm not sure if it's good news because it's gravel next. But I am always happy to score big points then we have to deal with the rest the best we can.

Q:

It was against the odds because there was an incident on the road section and we noticed the damage after you'd completed that final stage. How much did that damage hinder your rally today, did you notice the loss of the side of that door?

SO:

The impact was psychological honestly, it was quite a shock in the morning honestly when it happened. I had a big hurt in my back, it was still quite a big impact. First of all, I was glad to see that no one is injured and the person with whom we had the accident was safe and it was just car damage. Honestly, in the moment, I thought my rally was over. Luckily the impact was straight on maybe one of the strongest points of the car. It damaged a bit the cosmetic but behind it, the wheel was straight and the rollcage was untouched and even the door, the foam protection was in it so the safety was still there. Only some leak where Julien [Ingrassia, co-driver] had to wear this goggle like you see. He was getting a lot of dust in his eyes. It's been a hell of a ride for us today, a rollercoaster. Like I said, I don't think the car was really slower. Somehow I was struggling a bit to have the pace, like I said, probably a bit of psychological also. Of course, the aerodynamic was definitely not optimum but the rest is hard to say. At the end of the day, Elfyn had a strong morning also, even without this issue for me it would have been close anyway. I think this first Rally Croatia delivered a great show and I hope all the fans enjoyed it.

Q:

Just a quick word on the Power Stage, all three of you seemed to be on the ragged edge of what was risk out there. It was an incredible run through that stage...

SO:

Yeah, it's been like I said, this stage was a bit crazy, one of the most difficult stage we've done, I guess. It was a very narrow road, a lot of small jumps, crests, blind corners, dirty corners, some very low-grip section. It was everything in there and I had a last push for sure, a little moment also over a jump. I didn't expect the car to jump so much and I almost lost it on the landing. But that's the way it is when you play with the last tenths, you have to push and take some risks and we got the reward out of it.

Q:

What a rollercoaster ride the Croatia Rally has been Elfyn, you took the lead during what were two really strong stages for you this morning. Yesterday you talked about not having the bravery to push on the dirty sections of the stages but it seemed to be a bit of a different Elfyn Evans we saw this morning?

EE:

Obviously, I didn't feel 100 per cent comfortable at the start of the rally. I played about a bit with the set-up I think like everybody else did to be honest because it's obviously a new rally with new challenges and conditions we haven't really faced before. As soon as we got that settled on Saturday afternoon I was feeling really good in the car to be honest and enjoyed the stages today. It was a good morning, but I just fell short at the final hurdle.

Q:

How frustrating was that on the Power Stage, a small mistake from you obviously cost a few seconds?

EE:

I don't think the actual mistake cost that much, it was just that there was such a long stage after it. You have to carry all that lost speed down that long straight. It happens. It was a bit more slippery than I expected on that corner and that's just sometimes how it goes. Like Seb mentioned sometimes you have to take a few risks if you want to set the times, especially with things as close as they are and sometimes it doesn't work out which it didn't do for us today.

Q:

What can you take away from this event in terms of what you've learned about the performance of the Yaris on Tarmac?

EE:

Obviously, it's the first time for all three of us to sample the car on a full asphalt rally. So there was a bit to get to grips with and of course the new Pirelli tyre as well to adapt to. Although when you have two days of testing and you feel pretty good with the car there's nothing like rally conditions and obviously the pollution and how the car reacts to the different surfaces. The pace of the car has been strong and the team has done a good job.

Q:

The word rollercoaster was mentioned to Elfyn and it feels like it has been that this weekend, all three of you have led the rally and you had such a strong day on Friday. Unfortunately, the turning point came with the wrong tyre choice and you've had to fight back since?

TN:

As you mentioned it was really a rollercoaster for us this weekend. We had some really great stages, but we also had some huge disappointments. Several things came together but at the end we just missed out by a little, a potential victory. So we have to analyse why such mistakes have been done and how to improve that for the future. Very often we are very close to fight for the victory or second or third place and every time we lose it by a few seconds or tenths. That's of course frustrating but, on the other hand, I also know that I've taken the maximum out of the car this weekend. I was really the only driver in the team to follow up with the speed of Sébastien and Elfyn. I was right on the edge all the time and sometimes over the edge as well. But it's another podium, a third consecutive podium in the season and strong points and P2 in the championship.

Q:

Second place in the championship and points in the bag for the championship are crucial, how did you start the day in your mind because it was 10s between three drivers this morning, anything could have happened out there and did you think, realistically, there was still a shot of the win?

TN:

There's always a chance and we know what can happen in rally. We saw it before the start of the first stage already with the incident on the road section what happened. The rally is not over until we bring the car back in the parc fermé. Everything was open so I pushed from the beginning, obviously not enough on the first two stages, we had a very strong third stage and in the Power Stage I just pushed that little bit too much and I lost a point there. But, at the end, in terms of position-wise no change for us.

Q:

Turning to Jari-Matti Latvala, a one and two for the team, which is incredibly important for the Manufacturers' Championship as well as the Drivers', obviously, but some heart-stopping moments across today, especially on that final Power Stage. What's your reaction at the end of it all?

J-ML:

First of all, I must say thank you to the guys, they did a fantastic job. It was amazing to see them fighting and all these three guys today were under the fight and it's not easy to watch you know. There is nothing what you can do and your heart is pumping. You look and Thierry did a small mistake and you know Seb and Elfyn are coming and you hope they don't do the same mistake. It's very difficult to be there. Like I said it's very exciting, but you can't react, you can't do anything, you just have to wait and see what comes up. Like I said they did really a fantastic rally.

Q:

You had an unusual situation this morning with what happened to Seb on the road section. Is that completely finished now that chapter or will there be any repercussions from that?

J-ML:

Like Seb said the most important thing is nobody was hurt. From that side everything is okay. But it might be that we need some minutes to discuss with the organisers a little bit about it. I am sure everything will be sorted out.

Q:

It was a slight disappointment for what happened to Kalle Rovanperä on the first stage of Friday morning but has the fact that these boys got a one-two made up for that?

J-ML:

Yeah, absolutely. Let's say Kalle is a young gun, he has the speed, but he doesn't have so much experience in the World Rally Car and I think he was a bit too fast for that experience and was paying quite a big penalty. On the other hand, he will have a nice road position for the gravel rallies and we will see him fight back. This is rallying and anything can happen. At the end now we are really happy with what we have achieved from this rally.

Questions from the floor**Jason Craig, Autosport (GBR)****Q:**

Before this rally you said leading the WRC after the Croatia Rally might not be such a good scenario given that five consecutive gravel rallies now follow. Was this at the back of your mind this weekend and are you now happy to be at the top of the standings going into Portugal?

SO:

Honestly, yes, it was at the back of my mind because at this point in the season... my target was seriously to be on the podium. Because either place you are on the podium have some good meanings. If you win, of course, that's the best, and that was the thing I tried the most to get. But I think I would have settled for a podium result if needed. It means you are still very close to the lead and you don't have to open the road on the next gravel event. The three of us can be happy today where we are now and it's a long way to go, still many rallies and many good fights, certainly.

Q:

Can you sum up what it was like to drive on the Croatian roads this weekend?

SO:

It's been an amazing rally. After the recce we all announced that it's going to be a big challenge but probably good fun to drive. The Croatia Rally definitely delivered. Personally, but I am sure my colleagues can join me, it's been fantastic to drive these stages and I am so happy the weather was so nice because on the rain condition it would have been really on ice the whole weekend. But with these conditions it's been great to drive.

Gregor Pavšič, Avto Fokus (SLO)**Q:**

Regarding the incident with the local car and the police, how are the talks going with the police and what's going on with the fact you drove away from the scene, is there going to be a penalty?

SO:

From myself I am more than happy to clarify one more time everything that happened. Like I say, I was very glad nobody was injured this morning. Of course, there was a bit of confusion in the moment because we discussed for a while and explained the whole situation and gave the whole data to the police. But the biggest issue I would say is that the policemen were not speaking any English so it was not that easy. And at some point, one of them gave me the signal to go and then his colleague said 'no' so you can see this video what we are talking about. But it's all-clear and we are going to clarify that one more time and definitely I am not someone who runs away. After the incident I just checked all was okay and we gave our driving licences, everything. We can be glad that today, it's only car damage and we will solve what needs to be solved tonight.

FIA WRC2 CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Mads Østberg (NOR) – TRT World Rally Team

Q:

Mads, let's start with you because it's been your first rally back in the WRC and the defence of your title. It's got off to the best possible start...

MØ:

Yeah it is excellent way to start our season and a good event as well. I was really excited to be back in the world championship but I must say it's been stressful to be a driver again because it's been a hard weekend, but it was really nice to be back competing. Our rally was very good to be honest. We were leading from quite early on and we have set some really good pace when we had to. For sure there was some really big fighting throughout the rally and it was never clear what would be the outcome. But it felt really good to come to the end with a win of course.

Q:

When you had a big lead yesterday after Nikolay Gryazin had his problem mistakes started to creep into your driving when you started to relax...

MØ:

It's not a rally where you want to relax to be honest. It was much more complicated and I didn't enjoy the rally after the fight was over and it was all about getting to the end. From that point when Nikolay was out of the fight we had such a healthy lead and we were just managing the rally from there to the end.

Q:

What did you think of the Croatia Rally, were you surprised with what you saw out there?

MØ:

We obviously had a bit of information before coming to the event, but I think it was really nice to see a new event. We tend to go to new places, but you can always compare it to something because the surface is similar or the character of stages, but this was something brand-new. I haven't seen stages like this before and for me I thought it was excellent and I really enjoyed the challenge, making new pacenotes and driving on this special Tarmac, which is like ice in some places. I am not used to that and I felt it was a great challenge and it was really nice to see the character of the rally, which in my opinion was very, very unique.

Q:

Mads, are you going to compete in Portugal?

MØ:

Yes.

FIA WRC3 CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Kajetan Kajetanowicz (POL)

Q:

Coming next to Kajetan Kajetanowicz and to what was a brilliant win in WRC3 after a fantastic battle, you must be delighted?

KK:

Yes, yes, to be honest we didn't expect such a demanding weekend. We know it will be a very complicated rally because we have seen videos of the recce and we knew much more. But for me on the dry roads it was absolutely difficult because I had the test on the wet roads and I tried to build my speed on dry roads. I didn't know in which way I must go with the set-up and that's why I am really happy to be here in the first position. But we need to do much more because we see in the last stage the gap was really, really big. But, okay, I didn't push at 150 per cent, but I know I need to be much quicker if I want to fight for the victory in the World Rally Championship in my category at the end of the season.

Q:

What did you find was the hardest challenge out there this weekend, Kajto?

KK:

Definitely the surface, the grip was changing all the time. In one corner the surface was changing two or three times. That was definitely the biggest problem for us because we haven't got a gravel crew and if you want to push you have to take a big risk in the situation. But, okay, these are the rules and we take it. Maybe it's why it's more exciting to push if you don't know what to expect in the middle or on the exit of the corner. You have to be focus and have a long neck and your eyes must be very open. That was very, very exciting rally and I'm really happy to be here.

Questions from the floor

Reiner Kuhn, Motorsport Aktuell (DEU)

Q:

Kajto, are you going to compete in Portugal?

KK:

Yes.

Mikolaj Sobol, Rallypoland.com (POL)

Q:

What was your attitude before the Power Stage, did your experience on Rally Estonia last season influence you?

KK:

Yes! I was thinking about this before. The plan was to win in our category but at the same time I was thinking about the last stage in Estonia. It's always hard to do it. For me the Power Stage is like a bigger pressure than before the start of the rally. It's good for spectators, but, for us, it's very demanding and difficult. You need to keep the pressure from the start to the end but we have three points and it's not too bad.

Q:

Did the surface remind you of Barum Czech Rally Zlín on which you have competed in the European Rally Championship many times?

KK:

We can compare these roads to the Barum Rally but we also have some roads in Poland, very narrow roads with many crests and slippery Tarmac but not like here. To be honest, this Tarmac is absolutely slippery, it's hard to say how much. Even if it's dry it's slippery and that's we drove on medium tyres many times and not on hard tyres. Slippery like on ice, I would like to say something more but I cannot do it.

FIA JUNIOR WRC Championship

Present:

Jon Armstrong (GBR)

Philip Hall (GBR)

Q:

Turning to Jon Armstrong: your first Junior WRC win on what has been a very difficult event out there. After a fantastic fight, how pleased are you to be sat in that seat right now?

JA:

Yeah, it's amazing. Sweden in 2020 I had that big accident and we sat out the rest of the year. Honestly after that crash I didn't know if I was going to go rallying again. It was a scary crash and I didn't have a huge budget to go back in the championship and get the confidence again. But through the support of family, friends, girlfriend, they wanted me to try because they know it makes me happy. Working for Codemasters I knew the opportunity was potentially there to try to get budget. It's been a long battle to try to get that budget approved but finally I was able to come back. It's a super-tricky rally, we didn't do any testing with the Rally4 car beforehand, it's the first rally me and Phil [Hall] have done together, ever, so it was really challenging. I found it so tricky on the recce because these roads are so different and each stage is different from one another. You're trying to manage what you're making so it's not too ambitious, but you want to go fast. It was a very stressful week, but it paid off and it's fantastic to win this rally. I wouldn't have said that was possible beforehand, but we were smart and we tried to stay out of trouble. Once the confidence was there, I felt like I could push and the times were good. And, in the end, we done a good enough performance to win so I am happy."

Q:

It must be a real confidence boost after coming back from that accident last year, do you feel a bit different now you're back in action properly?

JA:

Yeah, it's been really good to win but there are some very fast drivers in this category and I know I need to keep improving. If I'm going to win the championship I need to figure out how I can go faster because I know it's going to be a big challenge. We've made a good start but I also need to be faster and smarter, find the performance and stay out of trouble because the Junior WRC is all about trying to stay out of trouble and go as fast as you can but then you've got these stage-win points that can really total up per rally. For sure I need to be faster as the season goes on.

Q:

Turning to your co-driver, Phil Hall, a brand-new partnership for what was a very difficult event, how was that relationship in the car between you both?

PH:

It's going really well. We've known each other for years, we competed against each other for quite a long time and we've been friends for a while as well so he got touch during Covid after Jon's accident and the opportunity arose to do some work together, virtually as well as in the car. We put a lot of work and preparation into this season as well as this rally but over the internet, but we've not been able to meet up with each other because of what has been going on in the world. When we came to this rally it was really good to see how that has translated into a great relationship in the car already. There are a few things we can work on and develop all the time but we can do those things before the next rally in Portugal but it was a really promising start.

Q:

How busy was it out on the stages?

PH:

It was a great challenge and I really appreciated it, actually. I always enjoyed Corsica, which is a similar level of delivery should we say and when I've come here I've really enjoyed the challenge of getting those notes out as fast as you can. When you look at WRC co-drivers you have to aspire to that level of delivery when you are in the Rally4 cars and we're looking at that.