

FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

**2023 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP**

**CROATIA RALLY**

Pre-event Press Conference

April 20, 2023

**FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP**

Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT – Kalle Rovanperä (FIN), Toyota GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid

Hyundai Shell Mobis WRT – Thierry Neuville (BEL), Hyundai i20 N Rally1 Hybrid

M-Sport Ford WRT – Pierre-Louis Loubet (FRA), Ford Puma Rally1 Hybrid

**Q:**

Undoubtedly for all of us here in the WRC, for the team, for yourself, it’s going to be a tough weekend of rallying following the loss of Craig Breen last week. Just give us your thoughts on Craig and on how challenging it’s going to be this weekend for everyone?

**TN:**

I don’t know where to start, actually. I think about Craig himself there is a lot to say. He has been for three and a half years he has been with us in Hyundai, except for last year. There are so many things that have happened over those three years, many great memories. But I think mainly we are going to remember Craig as somebody who lived his dream 110 per cent, who achieved his goals in life by getting into WRC and driving the fastest cars in the world on an everyday basis, that was his goal. He was living it flat out and that is something we are always going to remember and not to forget his Irish humour, the tea he was drinking every time, tea with milk and as well many, many hours we would always spend in debrief because debriefs with Craig were always very, very long. There are lots of memories we are never going to forget we were always joking and talking about. And that’s what I’m going to keep in my mind. But as well… I know there is a message we will have to transmit from now as well Not only for ourselves but for the people and it’s something I realised we have often forgot over the past years or since I got into WRC and it got my business is first of all we need to have fun and that is one of the strongest messages he was transmitting to everybody. I had the chance to go to Ireland on Monday, to see his mother, and I will never forget the moment when she took my face with her two hands and said, ‘I want to see your smile’. Craig was always smiling and having fun and she said you guys need to transmit that message to the people out there, the people who dream to do what you are doing, show them you are having fun, show them you like what you do and I think that’s one of the messages I also want to transmit for the future now and I’m going to work on that.

**Q:**

The great challenge now is to put on a big show this weekend, which is what Craig would want you all to do. But it’s always a tough challenge to get on the podium here in Croatia, let alone the top one, how big a challenge is it this weekend?

**TN:**

It doesn’t matter what are the circumstances, it’s always a big challenge here in Croatia. The roads are very challenging, very nice I have to say. But obviously with the weather conditions we’ve faced during the last two days for sure, weather conditions make it very tricky and even more difficult. It’s a tough event we are going to face this weekend. We are prepared for what is coming but there will be a lot of unknown due to the weather where tyre choice is going to be crucial. Conditions for each driver can be different as we saw on recce. As we saw every two minutes there was a change in the weather so I think the regularity will pay off this weekend and the one who has the best compromises throughout the weekend will be at the top step of the podium.

**Q:**

Are your weather crews giving you any information about what could happen?

**TN:**

I mean it’s still difficult to say what will be the exact weather conditions at the moment. But, anyhow, the roads were very wet during the recce and the cuts are muddy. Even if there would be a bit of time of drying the conditions are still going to be tricky and the road evolution is still going to be big. I’m starting second on the road which obviously we have seen last year was not a bad position, obviously first is better but second is not bad and I need to benefit from that on the first loop and then, from then on, we need to be on a good rhythm all the time and do some good choices and be consistent.

**Q:**

Turning to Kalle Rovanperä, you have some fantastic memories of this event, winning last year to kick start you title-winning season. It was a brilliant battle in Croatia last year going down to the Power Stage, will we see he same again this year, will it be a tight battle this weekend?

**KR:**

Yeah, this event has been bad in first year and good in the second year. Definitely this year, as we know, the feeling is not the same to start the event but as Thierry said about Craig quite well he always loved and enjoyed driving the rally car. We will need to try to do the same to give the best show for the fans also. And try to enjoy as much as we can. I think that will be the goal in the beginning to try to have a good weekend. And even in this situation try to enjoy what we do.

**Q:**

The route is very familiar to last year with a few minor changes. Does anything stand out this year as being an exceptionally bigger challenger than normal after what you saw on the recce?

**KR:**

Overall it looks really similar, most of the stages are fully the same, one new stage and one new section. The new stage seems quite tricky but all of the stages here are. The stages are also changing quite a lot, we have a lot of different styles of stages here and I don’t really have any clear one stage that will be the most trickiest, there are many.

**Q:**

It’s exciting for the championship that we have five drivers separated by 12 points, we have to look pretty far back to find it so close but that means there is extra pressure on you guys not to make a mistake out there?

**KR:**

Yeah it’s true. I also saw some picture that it has been many, many years that it has been this tight so definitely it makes it more exciting for everybody to watch and follow and of course more pressure and excitement for us also to push harder but not to make a mistake, which is always the trickiest part let’s say.

**Q:**

Let’s turn to Pierre-Louis, talk to us about the big challenge this rally poses for your drivers. There is not a lot of grip out there, there is a lot of mud in the cuts, it’s going to be difficult, how are you feeling ahead of it?

**P-LL:**

For sure it will be a very difficult week. The rally itself is already difficult and for all of what we have to live last week mentally it’s much more difficult than usual, but we have to do the job I think. That will be quite tricky. The rally itself is very difficult with a lot of cuts and if the weather is not with us this weekend it can be one of the most difficult Tarmac rallies of the season.

**Q:**

The previous rally was a difficult rally for the team but hopefully you can turn it around this weekend. How was your confidence coming here?

**P-LL:**

For sure on my side it wasn’t the perfect start of the season with a bit of lack of luck sometimes so we need to do a proper rally, I hope no issue, no mistake from my side and we can do something great. We have a few rallies in a row and it’s important to start the series here.

**Q:**

What is the toughest challenge about this event?

**P-LL:**

You have so much grip with changes, the Tarmac can be different from one stage to another, you need a very good adaptation and be very in every condition, which is very difficult here.

**FIA SUPPORT CHAMPIONSHIPS**

**FIA WRC2 CHAMPIONSHIP**

PH Sport – Yohan Rossel (FRA), Citroën C3 Rally2

**FIA WRC2 CHALLENGER CHAMPIONSHIP**

M-Sport Ford World Rally Team, Grégoire Munster (LUX), Ford Fiesta Rally2

**FIA WRC3 CHAMPIONSHIP**

Martin Ravenščak (HRV), Ford Fiesta Rally3

**FIA JUNIOR WRC CHAMPIONSHIP**

RACB National Team – Tom Rensonnet (BEL), Ford Fiesta Rally3

**FIA WRC MASTERS CUP**

Johannes Keferböck (AUT), Škoda Fabia Rally2 Evo

**Q:**

WRC2 has another fantastic field of competitive drivers this weekend. Are you ready for the challenge of the Croatia Rally?

**YR:**

Yes, I think it’s not an easy week for all but the plan is to do my job, the car improved a lot, honestly. Citroën bring a good evolution for this event and I think it’s not bad. I need to drive very well and we will see what happens but I think it’s not an easy weekend.

**Q:**

The stages are challenging but the weather might be kind to you this weekend, it might be dry out there, but even if it is, how much grip do these stages offer?

**YR:**

I don’t know. I think during the recce you look… yes okay it’s dry but 10 minutes after it rains, I don’t know why! Without gravel crew I think it’s not the same condition to Monte. Monte it’s completely dry, but this year without gravel crew I think it’s good, but now in Croatia without gravel crew I think it’s so difficult and a really challenging weekend but we will see. It’s the same for me for the last two events and it’s the same for everybody. The most important is to do no mistake, take a lot of points. If I win it’s perfect but the plan is to play for the podium and we will see. We have a lot of very fast drivers. The plan is to do mistakes and after the first day we will see what will happen.

**Q:**

Turning next to Grégoire Munster, an interesting season ahead because you’re going to be in quite a few different cars. We’ve already seen you as part of the Junior WRC Championship, now WRC2 and there are rumours of a P1 drive as well?

**GM:**

Yeah, there are some rumours about it but now we will first focus on WRC2. We had one event with the Fiesta in Monte Carlo, now in Croatia it’s maybe an event that suits us a bit more with all these cuts and mud that we are used to in Belgium, so we are really looking forward to it.

**Q:**

From what you’ve seen on the recce, as Yohan mentioned, the weather has been a little difficult in the past few days and those cuts are quite muddy still although hopefully they will dry out in time for the rally?

**GM:**

Yeah indeed, the sun is out now so it might dry a bit. Now for sure it will be quite dirty as we saw during the recce. I think like I said it’s conditions that suit us and if it stays a bit muddy it’s better.

**Q:**

It’s the third edition of Croatia Rally and it’s proven to be a really exciting, dramatic, challenging event. One of the favourites would you say for you?

**GM:**

Yeah, for sure, I really enjoy the stages. We did in the previous year. It’s a bit like a rollercoaster on Tarmac. Some stages, like the Power Stage for example, are very fast with all these crests and deceptive corners so a really tricky event.

**Q:**

Johannes, let’s turn to you now. A rollercoaster on Tarmac is how Grégoire described it, would you agree?

**JK:**

Yes it is. The stages are very fast and the rain this week makes it not easy for us, but we have a new challenge, we have a new car. We tested the car on Monday and now for us this is new here with the new car. Last year we go also here and last year it was full rain. But I think our plan is to stay clean on the road and make some points for the championship.

**Q:**

And the testing was successful on Monday?

**JK:**

Yeah we tested in full rain but I think for the rally there is no rain but in the corners there are so many places with mud and that’s not easy for us. I hope Yohan makes a good line for us!

**Q:**

What is the target for you this weekend?

**JK:**

In the first loop we will feel the car and learn the car and we will see. We will have a challenge with Armin Kremer and Mauro Miele, they are two fast guys and that is our target to catch them.

**Q:**

Martin, there’s a big smile across your face, you must be eager to start your home event, how are you feeling?

**MR:**

I’m feeling great, our goal for this rally is of course to have fun and enjoy because like Craig said life is short. Just to finish without SupeRally and try to be the first Croatian crew and try to fight with the other guys from the WRC3 class to try to show our speed and to see how much we need to learn more to fight with the guys.

**Q:**

It must be fantastic to hear that so many drivers who love the Croatia Rally because it has brought up a huge challenge for everyone and there is always a lot of excitement for everyone. That must make you quite proud?

**MR:**

Yes I’m very proud because Croatia Rally... I never thought it would be here. When Daniel Šaškin said one day I will bring the WRC to Croatia everybody laughed at him and said no way.

**Q:**

But it’s here and maybe you can give us some information about the weather this weekend – will it stay dry or will we see some rain?

**MR:**

I don’t know, we will see, I hope it will be dry.

**Q:**

Let’s turn to the Junior WRC Championship and to Tom Rensonnet. Welcome Tom, I believe you’ve been competing in Croatia recently to get some experience of these roads and that went well for you, yes?

**TR:**

Yes, for the first time I had a little experience of the conditions because we did the rally here two weeks ago and it was good preparation. I love Tarmac but it’s a very tricky and difficult rally but we will see.

**Q:**

As Grégoire said, the Belgian drivers are used to muddy Tarmac events so it must be familiar to you?

**TR:**

It’s the same condition in Belgium but it’s very narrow, it’s very fast corners. It has the big cuts and dirty roads and we will have fun for sure.

**Q:**

How did Shakedown go this morning, how was the car?

**TR:**

We tried some different set-ups, we tried the hard tyres, we did a good shakedown. We are very happy.

**Q:**

What has your experience of the Junior WRC been like so far?

**TR:**

I don’t have a big experience, I have only 25 rallies only on Tarmac apart from Sweden. But I am here to learn and improve on the weekend. I don’t have any plan. We will see after the weekend. I am very grateful to the RACB National Team to be here, it’s a very good opportunity. Without the [Belgian] federation I would not be here so we will enjoy it.