**Press release**

**Leg one end of day report: Thrilling fight in store with 5.7s covering Croatia Rally top two**

**Zagreb, 21 April 2023** – The stage is set for another thrilling day of action on Croatia Rally 2023 with the top two drivers separated by a mere 5.7s after 130.18 timed kilometres of world championship rallying at its best.

Thierry Neuville and co-driver Maritjn Wydaeghe are on top for the Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team, but Elfyn Evans and Scott Martin are firmly in the fight for the rival Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT heading into Saturday’s second leg.

The prospects for more WRC-based excitement in Croatia follow eight drama-filled stages in the picturesque hills of Samoborsko Gorje, Žumberak and Karlovac west and southwest of host city Zagreb throughout Friday when thousands of fans savoured the intense competition – and plenty of sunshine.

Sébastien Ogier, the winner of the first Croatia Rally to count for the FIA World Rally Championship in 2021, took victory on the opening stage, the 19.20-kilometre Mali Lipovec - Grdanjci test to open up a 2.6s lead in his Toyota GR Yaris Rally1.

However, the eight-time world champion’s advantage wouldn’t last as he was forced to stop approximately 12 kilometres into SS2, Stojdraga - Hartje, with a damaged front-left wheel, caused by striking a hole through a cut by the side of the road.

Ogier and co-driver Vincent Landis were stationary for a mere 1m07s as they changed wheels but the delay dropped them down the order and handed first place to Neuville/Wydaeghe in their Hyundai i20 N Rally1 Hybrid.

But despite leading heading to the midday service halt at the Zagreb Fair, Neuville was frustrated not to be further ahead in the battle for Croatia Rally victory.

“We are more or less able to follow the times but I feel like if we would have a better car on Tarmac we would be much faster,” Neuville said. “I could go so much faster but the car doesn’t let me. We are trying different set-ups all the time, but I just don’t get the right thing.

“It was a bit better at the end of the day [and it’s] a great achievement for all the team and for us. We have done a decent job, [but] it hasn’t been easy at all to be honest.”

Of his SS2 delay, Ogier said: “I avoid the cut, I really avoid as much as I could but still just the fact this compression made the puncture. For sure when you lose a minute and a half the race is different, it’s a shame but what can we do?”

Ogier hit back from his SS2 delay with the quickest time on SS3 (Krašić - Vrškovac) and SS4 (Pećurkovo Brdo - Mrežnički Novaki), his stage-four best coming despite the fact he ripped off part of his rear spoiler on branches when he rand wide on a right-hander. With this Toyota Yaris repaired in service, Ogier was quickest again on SS5 but he reported a second damaged tyre on SS8 causing further delay. He’s fifth overnight, 1m23.7s behind leader Neuville.

Evans, meanwhile, almost won in Croatia in 2021 only for mistake within sight of the finish to allow his Toyota team-mate Ogier to snatch victory by 0.6s. And after a puncture restricted him to fifth in 2022 – when Kalle Rovanperä overtook Ott Tänak on the deciding stage – the Briton is determined to triumph at his third attempt.

“It wasn’t really the strongest start to the day, there was a lot of pollution on that first [stage] this morning but after we kept building and building and it’s been pretty okay,” said Evans, whose only real cause for concern was a soft front-right tyre at the end of SS3. “Of course it’s not an easy rally with a long way to go. It’s going to be an interesting fight hopefully for the rest of the weekend. I should have won it before but I didn’t quite win it.”

Ott Tänak and Martin Järveoja hold third place overnight for M-Sport Ford World Rally Team, just 3.4s ahead of Neuville’s Hyundai team-mate Esapekka Lappi.

Tänak’s choice of wet weather tyres for SS6, which proved to be dry in several key sections, allowed stage winner Lappi to demote the Estonian for third. But Tänak, who stalled at a hairpin on SS1 and reported turbo and steering issues, was back in front when he won SS7.

Takamoto Katsuta, who spun in a narrow section on SS5 and had to reverse, demoted Pierre-Louis Loubet for sixth on SS8 when Loubet was slowed by a hybrid issue and a delaminated rear-left tyre on M-Sport Ford Puma Rally1 Hybrid.

World champion Kalle Rovanperä is eighth overnight having damaged his front-left wheel in the same corner of SS2 where team-mate Ogier also hit trouble. The Finn was stationary for 1m58s and said afterwards it was a “stupid place to get a puncture”.

Yohan Rossel leads the WRC2 category in ninth overall aboard his PH Sport Citroën C3 Rally2, which has received several updates for Croatia Rally. Category rival Nikolay Gryazin is next up in a Škoda Fabia RS Rally2 and also on top in the WRC2 Challenger division.

William Creighton is 9.0s ahead of Laurent Pellier in WRC3 and Junior WRC. Armin Kemer holds first position in the WRC Masters Cup. Željko Magličić has the honour of being the top Croatian driver in 38th overall.

Four double-use stages, located west of Zagreb, provide the challenge on Saturday. Starting with the 23.76 kilometres of Kostanjevac - Petruš Vrh from 07:54, Vinski Vrh - Duga Resa (8.78 kilometres) is next from 09:05 with the first pass of the untried Ravna Gora - Skrad (10.13 kilometres) due to get underway at 10:23. Platak (15.63 kilometres), which is based close to a ski resort and in view of the Adriatic Sea by Kvarner Bay, was added to the Croatia Rally route in 2022 and runs for the first time at 11:26. All stages timetabled in the morning are repeated in the afternoon with the second visit to Platak closing the day’s action from 19:26 ahead of service beginning at 21:36.

**ENDS**

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