**Press release**

**Leg three report: Emotional Evans wins Croatia Rally 2023 for Breen**

**Zagreb, 23 April 2023** – Elfyn Evans maintained his overnight advantage to win Croatia Rally 2023 and move joint top of the FIA World Rally Championship standings in the process.

In highly emotional scenes at the finish, Evans dedicated his victory to the family of Craig Breen, who lost his life in a testing accident preparing for the fourth round of the WRC season.

With Scott Martin co-driving his Toyota GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid, Evans set out for the final four stages this morning leading Ott Tänak by 25.4 seconds. With Tänak offering little threat at the wheel of his Ford Puma Rally1 Hybrid, Evans made avoiding mistakes on the challenging Tarmac roads his main focus. He finished first with an advantage of 27.0s over Tänak as Esapekka Lappi completed the podium for a Hyundai team struggling to come to terms with the loss of their driver Breen.

“It feels so insignificant now, that’s the bottom line,” Evans said after he completed the Wolf Power Stage with the seventh fastest time to secure his first WRC victory since Rally Finland in October 2021. “Obviously we’ve been working to this for a long time but it’s surprising how little it means just at the moment. We’re back to missing our friend now after the real focus of the weekend. Straight away when you come across the finish line that’s all you can think about. We promised the family we would enjoy the weekend, we’ve done that. I’m sure they were following us. We definitely thinking of you.”

Welshman Evans, who lost out on winning the first Croatia Rally to count for the WRC in 2021 by 0.6s, becomes the third winner of the Zagreb-based event since it joined the world championship two seasons ago. He follows his Toyota team-mates Sébastien Ogier and Kalle Rovanperä in winning a rally that is quickly cementing its reputation as one of the most demanding on the calendar.

For Tänak, the result marked his second consecutive runner-up finish in Croatia after he lost out to Rovanperä in a final-stage decider 12 months ago. He remains firmly in the thick of the championship fight, however, just four points behind joint leaders Ogier and Evans.

“Result-wise it’s a lot for sure,” the M-Sport Ford World Rally Team driver said. “For sure we are missing a lot of consistency and quite a lot of performance as well. No speed really but again good points so hopefully the speed will follow at some moment.”

Lappi’s capture of third place – his first podium in Hyundai colours – came at the end of a difficult week for the Finn, who struggled for confidence on the slippery Croatian stages. “It was not easy to come here for most of us. Thank you that you came, you give us the opportunity to drive again. I know it was tough, it’s been really tough, the toughest week ever I guess. We kept our head together. With a smart drive we managed to be on the podium which is very important for me and for the team this week.”

Rovanperä began the final leg held in typical spring sunshine 2.0s behind Ogier in the battle for fourth. But he was ahead after he outgunned Ogier through the day-opening Trakošćan - Vrbno test, the most northerly stage of the rally. He was quicker again than Ogier through Zagorska Sela - Kumrovec and on the repeat of Trakošćan – Vrbno, where Ogier’s challenge was undone by a slide in the closing kilometre. By setting the second fastest on the Power Stage, Rovanperä beat Ogier to fourth by 9.7s and closed to within 19.7s of third-placed Lappi.

It was a rally of playing catch-up for world champion Rovanperä and eight-time title winner Ogier after they both broke a left wheel on the same corner on Friday’s second stage. Ogier then picked up 70 seconds in time penalties. By coming home 1m28.0s behind Evans, it was a case of what might have been for the Frenchman, whose partial season is set to resume on Rally Italia Sardegna in June, subject to confirmation.

For Rovanperä, his wait for a first win of 2023 goes on but he’ll take heart from the fact he’s only a point off the championship lead and will leave it to Evans to open the road on the next round in Portugal.

Takamoto Katsuta completed the top six with Pierre-Louis Loubet overcoming an engine issue and bent steering to finish seventh. PH Sport’s Yohan Rossel won WRC2 in eighth overall aboard his upgraded Citroën C3 Rally2 followed by Nikolay Gryazin, who claimed the runner-up spot in WRC2 and the WRC2 Challenger victory. Oliver Solberg completed the top 10 but as he wasn’t registered for WRC2 points in Croatia, third place class points went to his Toksport Škoda team-mate Emil Lindholm, the defending category champion.

Eamonn Kelly scored a maiden WRC3/Junior WRC double after long-term leader Laurent Pellier dropped out with a mechanical failure prior to SS19. Armin Kremer won the WRC Masters Cup, while the honour of finishing as the top Croatian driver went to Tomas Hrvatin.

Thierry Neuville restarted following his crash on SS11 and went quickest on the Wolf Power Stage as his gamble to save approximately 40 kilograms of weight by not carrying any spare tyres on board his factory Hyundai i20 N Rally1 Hybrid, combined with a blistering run, paid off. “I’m so disappointed for the team, for us after all what happened [not to win the rally],” he said. “It’s a tough moment, we really wanted that victory, we wanted to make Craig proud for everything. We missed the opportunity unfortunately. We always have to give more than 100 per cent and when you are on the limit you cannot avoid such mistakes and it’s very tough. We gave it everything in here and this one was for Craig.”

**ENDS**

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