**Press release**

**Leg two end of day report: Evans four stages from Croatia Rally joy after action-packed Saturday leg**

**Zagreb, 22 April 2023** – Elfyn Evans heads into Sunday’s deciding four-stage leg on top in his bid to win Croatia Rally for the first time and end an FIA World Rally Championship victory drought that dates back to October 2021.

However, despite holding an advantage of 25.4 seconds over closest pursuer Ott Tänak, the Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT driver is taking nothing for granted with 54.48 competitive kilometres lying on store tomorrow (Sunday).

Evans, who lost out on winning the first Croatia Rally to count for the WRC in 2021 by 0.6s, appeared to be in control of the victory chase after Thierry Neuville crashed out of the lead 5.2 kilometres through the 10.13-kilometre Ravna Gora - Skrad test this morning.

The Welshman reached the midday service halt at the Zagreb Fair 22.6s in front, only for Tänak to eat into that margin as Evans struggled for form in his GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid.

With two stages of Saturday’s middle leg remaining, Tänak had cut the gap to Evans to 12.6s. However, with reported technical issues slowing his Ford Puma Rally1 Hybrid, Tänak appeared powerless to keep Evans in check as the 34-year-old opened up an advantage of 25.4s at the end of SS16, the repeat of the fast and furious Platak stage.

“I can’t say I was so happy with the way I drove in there and if Ott has had problems I wouldn’t wish that on him,” Evans said. “It’s not nice to inherit a gap like that but there’s still a long way to go.”

While Evans might be out of reach barring any issues, Tänak will tackle Sunday’s itinerary 30.0s clear of third-placed Esapekka Lappi, who has been unable to fully pinpoint the nature of his struggles aboard his Hyundai i20 N Rally1 Hybrid.

“Yesterday was a better day for us to be honest,” Lappi said. “I’ve never been really good on the dirty Tarmac and today was one of the days and I struggle a lot when there is a lot of pollution on the road.”

Despite being hit by two time penalties, 2021 Croatia Rally winner Sébastien Ogier is currently in fourth position, just 2.0s ahead of his factory Toyota team-mate, the reigning world champion Kalle Rovanperä, who triumphed in Croatia last season. “If there’s a fight we give everything we’ve got,” Rovanperä said of the prospect of taking on Ogier on Sunday.

Takamoto Katsuta is sixth at the overnight halt after a long battle with Pierre-Louis Loubet. WRC2 leader Yohan Rossel is eighth in his PH Sport Citroën C3 Rally2 followed by Toksport Škoda Fabia drivers Nikolay Gryazin and Emil Lindholm, the 2022 WRC2 champion, who hold ninth and 10th overall respectively. Gryazin also heads the WRC2 Challenger category.

Nicolas Ciamin had been in the WRC2 podium battle only to crash his Volkswagen Polo GTI R5 into retirement 16.8 kilometres from the start of SS13.

Despite nursing an unspecified mechanical issue, Laurent Pellier leads Tom Rensonnet in WRC3 and Junior WRC, the category for Pirelli-equipped Ford Fiesta Rally3s run by M-Sport Poland. Eamonn Kelly is third in both competitions after overnight leader William Creighton crashed out on SS9.

In the WRC Masters Cup, Germany’s Armin Kremer’s advantage is more than three minutes. Defending champion Mauro Miele is second.

Tomas Hrvatin is the best-placed Croatian driver in his Renault Clio Rally4. With four stages remaining on Sunday, Hrvatin is in 31st position.

Trakošćan - Vrbno, which includes several undulating sections and was a newcomer in 2022, is the rally’s most northerly stage and begins at 07h08 on Sunday April 23 with the second pass due at 10h26 following the first run of Zagorska Sela - Kumrovec from 08h38. The 14.09-kilometre Zagorska Sela - Kumrovec test counts as the rally-deciding Wolf Power Stage when it’s run for a second time from 13h15. The finish podium is due to begin in front of the INA building adjacent to the service park at 15h30.

**Neuville explains early exit, plans Sunday comeback**

Factory Hyundai driver Thierry Neuville began leg two leading by 5.7s and widened that gap to 10.5s after the opening Kostanjevac - Petruš Vrh run when rival Elfyn Evans reported being “just a little bit too careful on the gravel cuts”.

The gap increased by a further 0.3s after SS10 (Vinski Vrh - Duga Resa) only for Neuville to crash out on a third-gear right-hander 5.2 kilometres from the start of the 10.13-kilometre Ravna Gora - Skrad test, a new addition to the Croatia Rally itinerary for 2023.

“I was maybe a bit late on the braking and I entered the cut and when I entered the cut I just lost the rear,” Neuville told the WRC All Live service. “We hit some concrete on the outside and the rally was over. When you are fighting for victory small mistakes sometimes can have huge consequences and we need to live with that.

“We all were dreaming about the victory here this weekend. We were close but to be honest it hasn’t been easy in the car all weekend and we were fighting hard to keep believing and keep dreaming.”

Of his plans to restart on Sunday, when Power Stage points will be a clear target, Neuville added: “Basically we just broke the left rear damper and upright and the car will be fixed very quickly. We will be there for the Power Stage tomorrow.”

**ENDS**

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