**Press release**

**Meet the Crews at Croatia Rally: Friday**

**Zagreb, 21 April 2023** – The team principals of Hyundai Mobis Shell World Rally Team, Cyril Abiteboul, Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT, Jari-Matti Latvala and M-Sport Ford World Rally Team, Richard Millener, spoke to the fans gathered in the Zagreb Fair service park following the opening leg of Croatia Rally 2023. Shortly afterwards, the leading three drivers after SS8, Thierry Neuville, Elfyn Evans and Ott Tänak, took their turns on the stage. Transcripts from both sessions follow.

**Q:**

Leading the rally Cyril, it’s been a good day for Hyundai?

**CA:**

Do not forget the circumstance. We had some help from Toyota with a couple of punctures even if doing some recce of the road is also part of the sport! It’s good but it’s very tight, Evans is coming back so it’s going to be very intense tomorrow and challenging. The weather was challenging today and it will be very challenging again tomorrow.

**Q:**

The weather played its part this afternoon because there seemed to be a few headaches when making the right tyre choice, the optimum tyre choice. You seemed to get it right this afternoon though?

**CA:**

We could have done better I think with hindsight, which is always a beautiful thing in motorsport. Eventually there was no rain so we could have done things a bit differently. But the downside of what we have done was very low in comparison to what could have been the consequence otherwise. We were in good position, therefore there was no reason to gamble. We didn’t gamble, it means being conservative and having a bit of everything so two hard, two soft and two wet, which brought a fantastic response from Esapekka, who said when what do you expect said I have no idea. I loved that answer. But we will see tomorrow, it should be another interesting one.

**Q:**

You mentioned Elfyn Evans is starting to come back and is breathing down Thierry’s neck. There’s still a long way to go tomorrow so what can you tell us about what we might see tomorrow in terms of the conditions, what are you hearing?

**CA:**

We are hearing there can be some roads that can be pretty dirty, pretty muddy in any circumstance. We had a bit of rain today and maybe overnight, which is going to make the grip very, very low. It’s all about finding the right compromise from a set-up perspective between chasing a bit more performance but also trying to keep good traction and some good grip level.

**Q:**

Let’s turn to Jari-Matti Lavala, an interesting day out there as Cyril mentioned for Sébastien Ogier and Kalle Rovanperä, tyre damage in exactly the same place. It’s unusual to see that?

**J-ML:**

It is unusual but as a former driver we did with Ott Tänak back in Corsica in 2019 having the punctures on the same place. It was Saturday afternoon, the sun was shining, we were next to the sea and it was a right-hand corner… But unfortunately I think the boys cut it a little bit too much in this place, it was a high-speed place and there was quite a sharp edge of the Tarmac and Seb was planning to cut more first but then he decided at the last minute to try to avoid the cut but it came a little bit too late and he actually hit more the edge of the Tarmac. Kalle actually had it in his notes but he just wanted to go a little too much in. Unfortunately they had these punctures, changed the tyres, lost some time but then, you know, they tried to bounce back but they lost their chances for fighting for the top. But then we were really delighted that by the end of the day, we could see on the second loop, that Elfyn was catching Thierry and most importantly I saw the smile on his face at the end of SS8, which I haven’t seen for a while and I was really glad to see that and that means he has a good self-confidence.

**Q:**

It was difficult drivers to get confidence today and even though we’ve been here a couple of times it’s a complex event and some drivers were caught out by the conditions today…

**J-ML:**

Even though this morning it was dry drivers were saying the grip level is so low. Expectations when it was dry was that the grip should be higher but it wasn’t like that and you could see some mistakes happening this morning. But that’s the thing on this event, the grip is changing all the time and what you see and what you expect is not necessarily the same. They have to be able to adapt to constantly changing conditions.

**Q:**

Rich, talk to us about the day for M-Sport, with Ott we saw a little bit of frustration but we also saw pace as well and he’s in third position right now and he’s still in touching distance…

**RM:**

It’s a fantastic battle set up for the rest of the weekend, we were a little bit disappointed with the tyre choice we made that didn’t work out, we lost a bit of time there which we can’t afford. He’s feeling more confident in the car, which is great, a lot of things to do to make that better

But to see him enjoying it and feeling more comfortable means the pace is obviously there. For us after the disappointments in Mexico the goal is to score as many points as possible here. We’re looking forward to tomorrow and it will be great for everyone out there watching.

**Q:**

The tyre choice was a gamble that could have played into your hands but sadly didn’t?

**RM:**

This event is interesting and quite often exciting for the team. The weather plays a huge part. We were correct that there was some rain but sadly not as much as we hoped and it didn’t make the difference. We lost out on this occasion and it made it quite difficult.

**Q:**

Thierry, we’ve heard a lot of events to describe this event today, challenging being one of them. You are leading at the end of the first day so what’s it been like out there today?

**TN:**

It has been a tough day, that’s definitely the thing we can say. We knew that it’s going to be challenging, also with the road getting more and more dirty. But starting second we had a good opportunity to make up some time in the morning. And that worked pretty well despite not being very comfortable in the car this morning and still trying to keep the rhythm, keep the speed. But it just didn’t feel great. There was a bit of frustration this morning but it started to work better this afternoon. It wasn’t that good confidence that I would like to have but, at the end, we were able to keep the first position despite a difficult tyre strategy. The thing to remember is we are lying in first position overall and we all know… I wasn’t sure how I was going to find the confidence and the speed this morning on the first day of rallying after what happened but, at the end, I am satisfied that we managed to keep the first position for the team overnight. It’s not the end of the rally but I think it’s an important sign.

**Q:**

It's been a tough day for all competitors, you’ve had to keep your focus and that’s been a huge challenge. You mentioned a tricky tyre choice but how difficult was it because all around you people were putting different tyres on with wet weather tyres going on some cars. Were you worried you made the wrong choice going in?

**TN:**

It’s hard to say. You do the first stage after service and somehow you are left on your own. You don’t have a lot information, you get some from your team but the network is not always great either. You know there has been some rain but you don’t know what the conditions are now, has it been drying, is it still drizzling. We got many different information but at some point you need to take the decision. We went with two hard, two soft and most of the drivers had similar choices, except the Fords. And I think at the end it was the correct decision.

**Q:**

Tomorrow will be a tough day out there with Elfyn only 5.7s behind now. He’s coming fro you and will be tough to keep behind…

**TN:**

He is, we have had many, many fights over the last years. So it isn’t a surprise that Elfyn was pushing this afternoon. I always rely on the statistics when it’s like this. The statistics are good, I’m going to keep my trust and try to do the job tomorrow. It won’t be an easy one, we know that Elfyn is every year very fast over here so it’s not a secret. He missed out on the victory two years ago, very closely, and he wants the victory.

**EE:**

He's just rubbing all the salt in the wounds!

**Q:**

Isn’t he! He’s just trying to psychologically get you!

**TN:**

It’s going to be a fight, that’s for sure and probably like in Mexico it’s going to be down to the wire.

**Q:**

Elfyn, tell us about your day? Your team boss Jari-Matti Latvala said one of the best things today was seeing the smile on your face on the final stage today and seeing your confidence because he hasn’t seen your smile for a while, it’s been a good day for you out there?

**EE:**

Yeah, pretty okay. You know what I’m like, there’s no need to explain but the feeling is getting better and better in the car. And, to be honest, from the morning to the afternoon I managed to make some small changes which worked pretty well. Our tyre choice was a bit more risky than some of the others but it all worked out pretty okay in the end and I’m happy with how it all went.

**Q:**

Last year we saw some very difficult conditions, certainly on the Saturday stages. What are we expecting tomorrow, what are you hearing?

**EE:**

A bit like today, we don’t really know. It’s always a bit of a lottery in terms of the weather here. It will be a case of doing the decision in the morning with the information that we have and hope it’s the right one.

**Q:**

Turning next to Mr Tänak, third position and it’s a great battle, you are still in touching distance with these boys in front. A little bit of frustration this morning and this afternoon, talk to us about this tyre choice and these wet weather tyres.

**OT:**

It didn’t really play out! Like Thierry said the information was a bit missing. We were expecting some rain from some kilometres and when we were in the stage it started to get some sun in points. It didn’t play out, but fine, that’s how it is, and we didn’t lose too much. Still we are there so all to play for.

**Q:**

Were you happy with the pace you showed this afternoon, that long stage aside?

**OT:**

It’s been getting better. I can’t say it’s fully as it needs to be but since Monte for sure we have been doing some steps on Tarmac and I feel already better in the car. There are still some things to get sorted but the direction is definitely right.

**Q:**

Is there a key stage for you tomorrow that’s going to be the toughest out there?

**OT:**

We start already with quite a tough one in the morning, long and quite demanding with many different sections and it will be dirty as well. I would say all day tomorrow will be tough. We have a new stage, which was very dirty on the recce and then the stage we did just in the fog last year so they will be more or less all new.

**ENDS**

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