**Maestro Ogier Flies in Croatia Rally Shakedown Test**

**Zagreb, 18 April 2024** – Eight-time World Rally Championship title winner Sébastien Ogier got firmly back in the driving seat to set the fastest time on the pre-event Shakedown stage of the 2024 Croatia Rally. Returning to the cockpit for the first time since the Monte Carlo Rally in January, the Toyota Gazoo Racing legend set a time of 1 minute 55.7 seconds through the 3.65 km Okić test, fully seven tenths of a second faster than the time of team-mate and 2023 Croatia Rally winner Elfyn Evans.

In his third season since stepping back from full-time WRC competition, Ogier was in sparkling form and upbeat about the coming event. The Frenchman is chasing the 100th podium finish of his illustrious career this weekend in the Zagreb-based Croatia Rally, the first event of the season to be run on paved roads.

“Two and a half months is a very long time (since Monte Carlo), so actually the first run of the test was like ‘okay, I have to get back to the rhythm, it’s really fast’!” Ogier enthused to the WRC’s All Live TV crew after his first run. “But it was a very useful test: now I feel really happy to be here and excited to start this race.”

Team-mate Evans has assumed the role of team leader at Toyota Gazoo Racing after the 2022 and 2023 WRC champion Kalle Rovanperä also stepped back from full-time competition. The British ace won in Croatia last year and is an acknowledged asphalt expert, currently holding second place in the drivers’ standings after the opening three rounds of the 2024 season.

“It’s much the same (as 2023) but I would say generally, like always, it’s very dirty,” Evans explained. “Very challenging. A lot of low grip changes, so it’s not going to be easy.”

Seven tenths of a second behind Evans, the 2024 World Rally Championship points leader Thierry Neuville and his 2019 WRC title-winning team-mate Ott Tänak matched each other’s pace for Hyundai.

First on the road is the sweet spot in Croatia, where the crew has a cleaner road surface to contend with before they and the following cars begin to cut corners and bring grass, soil, leaves and stones out from the verge onto the racing line. Neuville’s standing in the points has handed him this honour on Friday’s competitive stages and he went about the business of fine tuning his Hyundai i20 N Rally1 on Shakedown without drama.

“It’s not much to say,” the Belgian said. “You’re going to see it throughout the weekend – hopefully in a good way. That was a proper stage to wake up this morning. I took it carefully just to get back the feeling of the car on Tarmac again..”

In contrast Tänak has endured a difficult start to his second stint with the Hyundai squad this year, after leading the M-Sport team in 2023. The Estonian struggled for pace on the first round in Monte Carlo, then retired from both of the following rounds in Sweden and Kenya, leaving him cautious about the coming Croatia Rally, starting fourth on the road.

“Maybe it’s not the moment to be really confident considering the start of the year so, yeah, for sure we try to be efficient this weekend,” he said. “Our first target is to have a clean weekend but it was the same in Kenya so let’s see how it goes now but we will give our go.”

The next fastest man through the Shakedown stage was M-Sport’s team leader, young Frenchman Adrien Fourmaux, who currently holds third place in the drivers’ standings after back-to-back podium finishes in Sweden and Kenya. Paved roads are a surface on which Fourmaux traditionally goes well, and the young charger was looking forward to the competitive action that lies ahead.

“I think this is why rally is so interesting. We are in the middle of nowhere in the Safari Rally, rather rough, and now here it’s all about precision on the slippery Tarmac, many cuts etc.,” he said. “It’s a bit the ‘calm before the storm’ of the rally but I’m sure it’s going to be interesting to follow it. I think it’s not too bad, I’m quite happy, I have good lines in front so it’s all good.”

The third works Hyundai of reigning WRC2 champion Andreas Mikkelsen claimed sixth on the timesheets as he learns to master the huge power of the Rally1 hybrid machinery in the sport’s premier class. Mikkelsen had assumed that Dani Sordo, the Spanish driver with whom he shares the schedule in the third Hyundai, would be competing in Croatia but after a small off on his first run through the Shakedown, the Norwegian was content with his pace.

“It’s really nice to be back, the car felt really nice,” he said. “I was stuck a bit in a junction in the stage (on my first pass) so I stalled, I had to restart, but the car feels good. It should be an interesting weekend.”

The third Toyota of Takamoto Katsuta took seventh on the Shakedown timesheet, with the Japanese driver hoping to remain in contention throughout the challenges that Croatia can present. “(The car is) not feeling so good so need to check a few things but all okay otherwise,” he said. “(I hope) to manage the situation, to be without mistakes would be nice this weekend. Could be a good old mess I would say!”

Closing out the order among the Rally1 cars was the second M-Sport entry of young Belgian Grégoire Munster. This is his third visit to Croatia but his first in a Rally1 car and although asphalt rallying is where he has the most experience, Munster’s priority is to avoid going out of the event too soon.

“I found Croatia Rally very difficult in Rally2 so in Rally1 everything is coming even faster!” he joked. “Not such a bad feeling with the car, I was a bit too careful, but quite confident. The target is having a trouble-free event.”

Behind the premier group of eight cars, the rest of the classes which will compete on Croatia Rally followed with Frenchman Yohan Rossel, second in the WRC2 standings for Citroën, looking to close the gap to points leader Oliver Solberg as the Swede sits out this event.

Rossel was the fastest of the WRC2 runners and declared himself satisfied with the preparations for the event, going 0.4 seconds faster than team-mate Nikolay Gryazin, with the Toyota of Finland’s Sami Pajari third, the Škodas of Pepe Lopez and Gus Greensmith fourth and fifth and the Hyundai of Nicolas Ciamin sixth.

Czech driver Filip Kohn set the pace among the fleet of Ford Fiestas contesting WRC3, among whom Bruno Bulacia set the pace among the Junior WRC novice competitors.

Croatia Rally begins with the pageantry of the Ceremonial Start, which will take place outside the National and University Library in central Zagreb at 18:30 on Thursday evening. Flagging the cars away will be Croatia’s Minister of Tourism and Sport, Nikolina Brnjac, alongside the Deputy of the Mayor of Zagreb, Luka Korlaet, and other members of the national sporting administration. The competitive action starts at 08:28 on Friday morning, with the 23.63km Krašić – Sošice stage opening the first day’s loop. – Eight-time World Rally Championship title winner Sébastien Ogier got firmly back in the driving seat to set the fastest time on the pre-event Shakedown stage of the 2024 Croatia Rally. Returning to the cockpit for the first time since the Monte Carlo Rally in January, the Toyota Gazoo Racing legend set a time of 1 minute 55.7 seconds through the 3.65 km Okić test, fully seven tenths of a second faster than the time of team-mate and 2023 Croatia Rally winner Elfyn Evans.

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**ENDS**



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