*PRESS RELEASE*

**Leg one end-of-day report: Thrilling battle in store with 8.0s covering top three on Croatia Rally**

*Zagreb, April 23, 2021* – A thrilling victory battle is taking shape on the Croatia Rally with the top three covered by a mere eight seconds after Friday’s action on spectacular sealed-surface stages west of the capital Zagreb.

Thierry Neuville/Martijn Wydaeghe hold the overnight lead in their Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC with a 7.7s advantage over reigning world champions Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Toyota Yaris WRC).

Elfyn Evans/Scott Martin are just 0.3s behind their Toyota team-mates in third and 8.0s down on Neuville/Wydaeghe as Friday’s leg concluded in thrilling fashion.

The drama began when Neuville/Wydaeghe, who suffered a half spin on SS5, survived a scare on SS8 by nudging a bank and briefly dropping onto two wheels. Ogier/Ingrassia then demoted Evans/Martin for second place in the overall standings with the fastest time with their third stage win in succession on this afternoon’s loop.

“We had a small moment,” Neuville said of his fright on SS8. “Obviously I was trying to push a bit more, but on the braking I just lost the grip and went a bit off but nothing major, it was all under control. I struggled a bit being first car on the road this afternoon because there was a lot of gravel on the road and no traction.”

Ogier, who scored his 600th WRC stage win on SS7, reverted to a set-up he developed during testing ahead of the rally, which dialled out the understeer that hampered him this morning.

“It’s always nice to have some statistic but what is important is we are in the fight, we enjoy and the car is nice and it’s more fun this afternoon to drive,” said Ogier. “It’s a long race and we have a nice battle ahead with Thierry and with my team-mate Elfyn. I think [Neuville] had a big moment there, he went in the bank, I see the lines. I think that was a close one, but I also had a close one this morning.”

Having dropped to third on Friday’s final stage, Evans is getting ready for a fightback on Saturday. “It does [mean an epic battle tomorrow],” he said. “It’s been quite close all day. Not the perfect afternoon loop for us to be honest but it’s not been bad either. Definitely there’s something to work on tomorrow so let’s see.”

**Tänak fighting back**

After a morning of struggle on a full set of hard compound tyres, Ott Tänak/Martin Järveoja began this afternoon’s loop with improved confidence and improved speed after several set-up changes at midday service, and they duly delivered with the fastest time on SS5.

“For sure we are improving so that’s the main [thing],” Tänak said. “Of course, I don’t feel really comfortable and it’s difficult to really push and extract the limit, but I tried to do everything I can in the zone I have and hopefully I can improve for tomorrow.”

Tänak/Järveoja are fourth overall, 31.9s behind their event-leading team-mates Neuville/Wydaeghe, with Craig Breen/Paul Nagle fifth in the third factory Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC.

On his first start on a WRC event in a Hyundai World Rally Car, Breen admitted he needs to make some improvements for day two. “Honestly, I have some things that I need to change in the car for tomorrow, some things that I had absolutely no reference for my pace, the road was completely different all day and I need to change some things in the car just to give me some help but we got through anyway.”

**Rookie Fourmaux thrives with a top-five**

Adrien Fourmaux, who is competing on a WRC event in a World Rally Car for the first time, completed Friday’s leg with a top-five stage time in his M-Sport Ford Fiesta to cement a strong sixth place in the overall order ahead of team-mate Gus Greensmith.

“I’m really, really happy to be honest, it’s amazing,” said Fourmaux. “The car is so nice to drive, it’s just crazy and the stages were really nice this afternoon. It’s just insane in some places, just places, just crazy. But I can be really happy because I try to improve my pace when I have the confidence and go back when I don’t have. Sometimes it’s so easy to do a mistake and if you are a bit out of the line you lose time. It’s a hard job!”

Behind Greensmith, Pierre-Louis Loubet/Vincent Landais are eighth overall followed by Takamato Katsuta/Daniel Barritt, who suffered a confidence-denting spin this afternoon. WRC2 leaders Mads Østberg/Torstein Eriksen complete the top 10 in their Citroën C3 Rally2.

Kalle Rovanperä/Jonne Halttunen, who started the Croatia Rally leading the world championship, have been forced to retire from the event after damage sustained to their Toyota Yaris WRC in their SS1 crash was considered beyond repair onsite.

**Østberg heads Gryazin in WRC2**

Mads Østberg/Torstein Eriksen completed leg one leading WRC2 by 7.8s over Nikolay Gryazin/Konstanin Aleksandrov (Volkswagen Polo GTI R5). Teemu Suninen/Mikko Markkula are third in their Ford Fiesta Rally2. Andreas Mikkelsen/Ola Fløene, who were third in WRC2 after the opening stage, stopped to replace a damaged right-rear suspension arm on their Škoda Fabia Rally2 Evo but subsequently continued.

Yohan Rossel (Citroën C3 Rally2) holds a narrow lead in WRC3, 2.2s up on three-time European champion Kajetan Kajetanowicz. ERC regular and former Austrian champion Niki Mayr-Melnhof is third.

**What’s next?**

The Croatia Rally continues tomorrow (Saturday) with eight more stages. The action begins with the 20.30-kilometre Mali Lipovec – Grdanjci stage from 08:29 local time.