*Press Release*

 **EVENT PREVIEW: WRC RETURNS TO CROATIA WITH WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP TITLE CHASE FINELY BALANCED**

\*Leading five drivers separated by 12 points after three WRC rounds

\*Croatia gearing up to host FIA World Rally Championship for third time

\*Challenging Tarmac stages will test the sport’s best over four days of top action

\*Event’s two WRC counters have produced different winners and second-place finishers

**Zagreb, April 20th** – The FIA World Rally Championship heads to Croatia for the third time from April 20-23 with the title race finely balanced following a thrilling start to the 2023 season.

With two wins from two outings, eight-time world champion Sébastien Ogier is the king of the championship order for Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT. However, the 39-year-old from France is just three points ahead of Thierry Neuville (Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team) and four points in front of his Toyota team-mate Kalle Rovanperä, the winner in Croatia last season and the defending world champion.

Ott Tänak, who won February’s Rally Sweden for M-Sport Ford World Rally Team, is five points further back, while Elfyn Evans, runner-up in Croatia in 2021, is also firmly in contention with a 12-point deficit to fellow Toyota driver Ogier to overcome.

All five drivers will be in action on the Zagreb-based Tarmac spectacular when they will bring a combined 10 WRC titles and 105 event wins to the Croatia Rally start ramp, with Ogier (2021) and Rovanperä (2022) the winners of the country’s world championship round to date.

But the list of drivers in the top-level, hybrid-powered Rally1 category competing in Croatia also includes M-Sport driver Pierre-Louis Loubet, Toyota’s Takamoto Katsuta and Esapekka Lappi, a one-time WRC event winner who now forms part of the Hyundai factory squad and led the previous round in Mexico before crashing out.

All Rally1 cars use fossil-free fuel as part of the WRC’s extensive and ongoing sustainability efforts in conjunction with the FIA, rallying’s world governing body.

UNIQUE CHALLENGE IN STORE

A newcomer to the WRC in 2021, Croatia Rally provides a huge challenge for the drivers and teams with ever-changing grip levels and surface conditions characterising the event. While the first edition to count for the WRC took place in mainly warm and dry conditions, those taking part in 2022 faced an extra challenge with rain and foggy conditions.

SPECTACULAR SCENERY AWAITS WORLD’S BEST DRIVERS

Croatia Rally is not only big on challenge it’s also big on spectacular scenery with stunning landscapes combining with historic buildings to create picture postcard views. Several castles feature on the route of this year’s Croatia Rally, including Novigrad na Dobri, Trakošćan, Veliki Tabor – the location of a refuel point on leg three – and Ozalj.

WHAT’S NEW IN 2023?

Croatia Rally organisers have followed a winning formula during the preparation of this year’s route by making limited modifications, although there have been some adjustments.

Leg one’s Stojdraga - Gornja Vas stage now runs to the village of Hartje, which means its length has increased from 20.77 to 25.67 kilometres, while Ravna Gora - Skrad is all-new for 2023 and replaces Jaškovo - Mali Modruš Potok on leg two.

Although the itinerary continues to feature 20 challenge-filled stages, the route changes have extended its competitive distance from 291.84 to 301.26 kilometres.

ROUTE OVERVIEW

The action on Thursday April 20 begins with the 3.65-kilometre Shakedown stage situated close to the ancient town of Okić, which has records dating back to 1193, and concludes with the Ceremonial Start at the National University Library and Zagreb Fountains from 18h30.

It’s off to the hills of Samoborsko Gorje, Žumberak and Karlovac west and southwest of host city Zagreb on Friday April 21 for four stages, starting with the 19.29-kilometre Mali Lipovec - Grdanjci test from 08h03. That’s followed by the corner-rich Stojdraga - Hartje stage from 08h56, the rally’s longest at 25.67 kilometres, Krašić - Vrškovac (09h59) and Pećurkovo Brdo - Mrežnički Novaki (11h12). Following a 40-minute service halt at Zagreb Fair, venue of the permanent service park, the morning stages are repeated in the afternoon with crews entering end-of-day service from 19h14.

Four double-use stages, located west of Zagreb, provide the challenge during leg two on Saturday April 22. Starting with the 23.76 kilometres of Kostanjevac - Petruš Vrh from 07h54, Vinski Vrh - Duga Resa is next from 09h05 with the first pass of the untried Ravna Gora - Skrad due to get underway at 10h23. Platak, which is based close to a ski resort and in view of the Adriatic Sea by Kvarner Bay, was added to the Croatia Rally route in 2022 and runs for the first time at 11h26. All stages timetabled in the morning are repeated in the afternoon with the second visit to Platak closing the day’s action from 19h26 ahead of service beginning at 21h36.

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.

FUTURE TALENTS ON SHOW IN CROATIA

As well as the drivers chasing overall victory on Croatia Rally, the WRC2, WRC3 and Junior WRC categories will be hotly contested. The WRC2 category for Rally2 cars has attracted 19 entries. Junior WRC has eight registrations with eight drivers also entered in WRC3 for Rally3 cars. Croatian brother and sister pairing Martin and Dora Ravenščak are among the WRC3 crews getting a taste of world championship competition ahead of an expanded programme in 2024. Although WRC2 points leader will be competing in Croatia, he’s not nominated the event as one of his scoring rallies.

DRIVER QUOTES

Sébastien Ogier: “I have a good starting position [first on the road] and the team has seen my form on Tarmac so I could be a good asset for the team. I have good memories of this event and it’s good to drive in Croatia again.”

Thierry Neuville: “Two times at this rally and each time I was leading. After the tyre choice on the first edition and then alternator problems, the target is definitely victory. Obviously with the line-ups of the other teams it won’t be easy, that’s for sure. I love the roads, they are really challenging, really fun. If we feel as comfortable as [Rally Mexico], it’s going to be another nice fight.”

Ott Tänak: “It was a good chance to get some extra mileage on Tarmac [by contesting the Belgian championship Rallye des Ardennes]. The roads and the conditions were tricky, so this was good experience [because] Croatia can be a tricky event, which can bring lots of surprises. We have to see how the weather is.”

LEADING ENTRIES

Click [HERE](https://app-cdn.sportity.com/9fa6277e-7bc3-4c91-9698-707585cadd81/34353a6d-9d1e-4ec4-8ded-392f3913bd1d_Amended%20Entry%20List.pdf) for the full entry list. The top 15 crews according to their seeding appear below:

No Driver (NAT)/Co-driver (NAT) Car

17 Sébastien Ogier (FRA)/Vincent Landais (FRA) Toyota GR Yaris Rally1

11 Thierry Neuville (BEL)/Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL) Hyundai i20 N Rally1

69 Kalle Rovanperä (FIN)/Jonne Halttunen (FIN) Toyota GR Yaris Rally1

8 Ott Tänak (EST)/Martin Järveoja (EST) Ford Puma Rally1

33 Elfyn Evans (GBR)/Scott Martin (GBR) Toyota GR Yaris Rally1

42 Craig Breen (IRL)/James Fulton (IRL) Hyundai i20 N Rally1

4 Esapekka Lappi (FIN)/Janne Ferm (FIN) Hyundai i20 N Rally1

18 Takamoto Katsuta (JPN)/Aaron Johnston (IRL) Toyota GR Yaris Rally1

7 Pierre-Louis Loubet (FRA)/Nicolas Gilsoul (BEL) Ford Puma Rally1

20 Oliver Solberg (SWE)/Elliott Edmondson (GBR) Škoda Fabia RS Rally2

21 Yohan Rossel (FRA)/Arnaud Dunand (FRA) Citroën C3 Rally2

22 Emil Lindholm (FIN)/Reeta Hämäläinen (FIN) Škoda Fabia RS Rally2

23 Gus Greensmith (GBR)/Jonas Andersson (SWE) Škoda Fabia RS Rally2

24 Nikolay Gryazin (ANA)/Konstantin Aleksandrov (ANA) Škoda Fabia RS Rally2

25 Adrien Fourmaux (FRA)/Alexandre Coria (FRA) Ford Fiesta Rally2

KEY INFORMATION

Starts: 18h30, Thursday April 20, National and University Library and Zagreb Fountains

Finishes: 15h30, Sunday April 23, INA Building, Zagreb

Base: Zagreb Fair, Zagreb, Croatia

Surface: Asphalt

Eligibility: Round 4, 2023 FIA World Rally Championship (includes WRC2, WRC3 and JWRC)

Special stages: 20

Special stage distance: 301.26 kilometres

Liaison distance: 1348.42 kilometres

Total distance: 1649.68 kilometres

PROVISIONAL STANDINGS

WRC Drivers (after 3 of 13 rounds)

1 Sebastien Ogier (FRA) 56pts

2 Thierry Neuville (BEL) 53pts

3 Kalle Rovanperä (FIN) 52pts

4 Ott Tänak (EST) 47pts

5 Elfyn Evans (GBR) 44pts

6 Craig Breen (IRL) 19pts

WRC Co-drivers (after 3 of 12 rounds)

1 Vincent Landais (FRA) 56pts

2 Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL) 53pts

3 Jonne Halttunen (FIN) 52pts

4 Martin Järveoja (EST) 47pts

5 Scott Martin (GBR) 44pts

6 James Fulton (IRL) 19pts

WRC Manufacturers (after 3 of 12 rounds)

1 Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT 127pts

2 Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team 100pts

3 M-Sport Ford World Rally Team 73pts

WRC2, WRC3 and Junior WRC standings available [HERE](https://www.fia.com/events/world-rally-championship/season-2023/standings)

WHAT HAPPENED IN 2022?

Kalle Rovanperä pulled off an amazing comeback on the deicing Wolf Power Stage of the 2022 Croatia Rally to snatch victory from Ott Tänak by just 4.3s, at the climax of an amazing final leg during which the Finn’s hopes had appeared to slip away. The Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT driver, who had led the rally from the first stage on Friday morning, appeared destined for a heartbreaking defeat following the penultimate stage on Sunday morning. He entered the 13.15-kilometre Trakošćan - Vrbno test with an advantage over Tänak of 28.4s. But heavy rain and a variation in tyre choice caught out Toyota and wiped out Rovanperä’s lead. Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team driver Tänak ran with a crossover pair of soft-compound Pirellis and two wet-weather tyres, with Rovanperä and his co-driver Jonne Halttunen on two hard and two rain tyres – and it worked out in Tänak’s favour. He was 29.8s faster to jump into a slender lead of 1.4s with just the Wolf Power Stage to go. But in dry conditions and on a mixed tyre choice of two hard-compound Pirellis and two wet-weather tyres, versus Tänak on softs all round, Rovanperä overturned the deficit with a fantastic stage-winning run. Tänak crossed the beam 5.7s down to lose the rally by 4.3s. Thierry Neuville and co-driver Martijn Wydaeghe delivered a 2-3 result for Hyundai, but almost lost it with a dramatic nose-dive into a ditch on the Wolf Power Stage. The pair had overcoming M-Sport Ford’s Craig Breen and Paul Nagle earlier on the final leg. Starting the day 4.9s down in fourth, Neuville seemingly grabbed the podium position on the second test of the morning with a committed stage-winning performance and widened the gap on the wet penultimate stage to 1m42.4s. It was just as well he did. The Hyundai i20 N Rally1 bounced out of the ditch and Neuville was able to nurse the car to the finish despite two punctures, to keep Breen off the podium by 46.3s.

PREVIOUS RESULTS

2022:

1 Kalle Rovanperä (FIN)/Jonne Halttunen (FIN) Toyota GR Yaris Rally1, 2h48m21.5s

2 Ott Tänak (EST)/Martin Järveoja (EST) Hyundai i20 N Rally1, +4.3s

3 Thierry Neuville (BEL)/Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL) Hyundai i20 N Rally1, +2m21.0s

2021:

1 Sébastien Ogier (FRA)/Julien Ingrassia (FRA), Toyota Yaris WRC, 2h51m22.9s

2 Elfyn Evans (GBR)/Scott Martin (GBR), Toyota Yaris WRC, +0.6s

3 Thierry Neuville (BEL)/Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL) Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC, +8.1s

FIVE FACTS

1: Only Thierry Neuville/Martijn Wydaeghe have visited the Croatia Rally podium more than once

2: Neuville and Sébastien Ogier top Croatia Rally’s list of stage winners with nine best times

3: At 25.67 kilometres, Stojdraga - Hartje is Croatia Rally’s longest stage

4: Of the Rally1 crews, only co-driver Nicolas Gilsoul has no previous Croatia Rally experience

5: Croatia Rally was the setting of one of the closest finishes in WRC history when Sébastien Ogier beat Elfyn Evans to victory by 0.6s in 2021

WHAT’S HAPPENED SINCE THE LAST CROATIA RALLY?

\*Points scored on last April’s Croatia Rally helped Kalle Rovanperä became the youngest World Rally Championship title winner, the Finn lifting the coveted crown aged 22 and one day.

\*While Rovanperä remains a factory Toyota driver, Esapekka Lappi has switched to Hyundai in place of Ott Tänak, who joined M-Sport Ford. Craig Breen left M-Sport to return to Hyundai where Cyril Abiteboul, once the head of the Renault Formula One squad, is now Team Principal.

\*Škoda has unleashed its latest Rally2 challenger, the Fabia RS Rally2. Ex-Rallly1 contenders Gus Greensmith and Oliver Solberg are among its drivers.

\*Mexico has returned to the WRC schedule, Chile is set to do likewise in late September, while the all-new Central European Rally will form the penultimate round of the 2023 season.

\*Croatia’s national team reached the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar last December and beat Morocco in the play-off for third place.

USEFUL LINKS

Event website (including news, itinerary, other documentation): https://rally-croatia.com/en/

FIA.com

WRC.com

ENDS

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www.rally-croatia.com

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