



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

**2008 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP
RALLY D'ITALIA SARDEGNA**

Pre-event FIA Press Conference
15 May 2008

Present:

Gigi Galli, Stobart VK M-Sport Ford Rally Team

Chris Atkinson, Subaru World Rally Team

Jari-Matti Latvala, BP Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team

Toni Gardemeister, Suzuki World Rally Team

Alessandro Bettiga, FIA Junior World Rally Championship

Martin Prokop, FIA Junior World Rally Championship

Welcome to the pre-event FIA press conference.

Q:

It's your home event and you will perform in front of thousands of local fans this weekend. Are you feeling more pressure to do well here than at the other rounds?

GG:

Not really. I am quite used to that. There is some more excitement to be here. Every Italian is looking for the only Italian driver racing with the WRC car. We are ready for that and everything is okay.

Q:

We have seen you on the podium already this year in Sweden; is a podium place the plan here or is a win a possibility?

GG:

I don't think so, because there are a lot of good drivers. I will keep this opportunity with a lot of humility. Just to do one example, last week, there was a lot of good testing. I did the test in the beach, it's not the same! It's good to be here on the island, but it's good to be in the car for the test. You can see in Jordan we had trouble on the first day to keep the right pace. It takes me time to get used (to it). It's the same here. You cannot get used to it (straight away). The problem is when you take a few seconds – what you can do? It's like that. What I would like is to keep a good pace, it's not easy though, particularly when it's tricky and narrow. We will do our best. Sure the feeling with the car and the tyre is good. I'm sure it will be some trouble to get to the right pace.

Q:

What are your aims here? You talked about a test on Friday and the rally on Saturday and Sunday...

GG:

I hope to win. If I can be first, taking away the official teams, if I can be the first one, it's my aim. I try to do that. My goal is to be constant, no trouble.

Q:

Your fan club is legendary with their singing on events; how much does their support help when you are competing?

GG:

I think you will hear something of them! That is something, let me say, it's not the fans from Gigi Galli, it's the fans from rallying in general. I have a good example from Jari-Matti in Sweden. Okay, the thing was my name, but they were singing Jari-Matti's name. Okay, it's maybe my fault they come, but after that they are the fan for everybody who has big passion for the sport.

Q:

I believe you are competing not only on the stages but on the tennis court as well this weekend? What's all that about?

GG:

If you like to smile, you are welcome to see how you have not to play tennis! It will be good fun.

Q:

Chris you recently tested the new Subaru Impreza for the first time – what did you think of it?

CA:

We have tested it, but it was more to get used to the new car. To sit in it and get used to the controls, that's all. For us, the focus is this weekend and the 2007 car. We've been working on that to improve the car. I think it's good.

Q:

There were rumours that this will be the last rally for the current Impreza and the new one will debut in Greece – is that the plan?

CA:

I don't know. That's up to the team. We've only just started driving that car. The focus, as I have said, is this event. When the new car comes we look forward to driving it.

Q:

After your result in Jordan you moved into third in the Drivers' Championship, just two points behind Sébastien Loeb and seven from the lead. Do you see yourself seriously fighting for the Championship this year?

CA:

Okay, the points are good, but I don't feel we can fight for rallies. We need to be there. Okay you can win the title without the rally wins, but we want to be up there. There are six drivers who can be at the top, you can be up there or down in sixth – that's what's making this sport exciting right now. We saw that in Jordan on the last round.

Q:

The damper problem continued in Jordan – have the team been able to do anything to rectify that for this event?

CA:

They've rectified the problem which happened to Petter's car, which is good news. As well as that, there has been some more development on the car. The car felt okay at shakedown. I'm looking forward to getting started. I hope there'll be no problems and we can have a good run.

Q:

Looking at the event, what would you say are the key elements to achieving success here this weekend?

CA:

We've had a lot of tricky conditions recently. That's been a lot to do with the weather, with the rain in Argentina and then the temperatures in Jordan. This is no different, the stages are narrower and there are lots of rocks. If you push it's easy to damage the car, make a mistake. All the top guys will be on the limit, there will be lots of action. But our aim is to stay out of trouble.

Q:

Are you confident for this event?

CA:

We know we can't quite match the pace to challenge for stage wins, but if we can get consistency, a good result could be on the cards.

Q:

Jari-Matti, you and your team-mate Mikko Hirvonen recently completed a test here in Sardinia – how did it go?

J-ML:

I drove the car for 240 kilometres in Sardinia, which was very nice. There was a little improvement with the set-up. It feels better than in Jordan.

Q:

The first time you ever led a WRC event was here in Sardinia last year. You've had some good results at this event but what can you achieve this weekend?

J-ML:

That's right. The speed was quite good in Jordan, but we missed Saturday morning. Mr Loeb was much faster. We still have work to do if we want to be at his speed. I want to get to the finish. That's one thing I want to achieve. It could be really nice if we could fight for the victory.

Q:

In your first season with a factory team you have already secured your maiden WRC win, but it seems to have been a fairly mixed start to the season. How would you evaluate your performance so far?

J-ML:

We have had ups and downs. We started in Monte-Carlo really badly. I didn't have confidence, but then in Sweden and Mexico I found the confidence. Then Argentina and Jordan were difficult. I need to take those things off and then after that we could get the proper result.

Q:

Your pace has been incredibly impressive; have we seen Jari-Matti at full 100% speed yet or is there still more pace to come?

J-ML:

I was at the maximum in Sweden, sometimes in Mexico and then in the last stages in Jordan I was going as maximum as I can – and you could see there was some damage in the car. It's about the feeling. When you have the feeling, you can do it. It was the wrong way to do it in Jordan, when I didn't have the confidence. When I have it, I can maybe go even a little bit more.

Q:

We have had a fair amount of rain on the stages so far this week. What were they like when you recce'd them and are they a lot rougher as a result of the rain?

J-ML:

If it rains, this rally will be like Argentina. The surface is sandy here, but it is quite hard. If it rains it will be soft and slippery and the rain will make ruts in the road. When it rains heavily it could bring the rocks from the mountains – it will be rougher and harder for the cars. I am hoping it will be dry; this rally is quite nice in the dry. If it rains it will be hard for the car and not so enjoyable for the drivers.

Q:

Toni, six rounds into the Championship with the Suzuki SX4 and you have yet to complete an event without the help of SupeRally. Is the team making headway on the reliability problems you have been experiencing?

TG:

Okay, the team is trying to learn from the problems and the mistakes, but it's difficult because you need homologation to sort the problems. On the last event the problems weren't the same, which is a good thing.

Q:

How was shakedown this morning?

TG:

I stalled at shakedown which wasn't a good start. After the team changed the engine mapping it worked very well, actually.

Q:

Have you had to change your approach to events this year, knowing that the car is not as competitive as you would like?

TG:

Now we think in a different way. We're not flat everywhere. I like to go flat, but sometimes you have to cool down and bring the car to the finish.

Q:

What is the team's strategy for this event?

TG:

Bring the cars to the finish – that's the only goal at the moment. We want a clean run.

Q:

How's your confidence?

TG:

Okay. I like this event. I am very confident, but the roads are quite rough. I know how we can go and try to stay away from problems.

Q:

There are rumours that the team management structure is changing – can you clarify the situation?

TG:

At the moment, everything is the same. I don't think it's coming to change. I haven't heard anything like that. Everything is the same. We will see.

FIA JUNIOR WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Q:

You drove a few different cars last year, why did you settle on the R3 for this season?

AB:

We had a good proposal from Renault Sport. The car is new and it has a lot of potential, so we decided to use it this season. Last year I used the Fiesta, Suzuki and the R3. We have decided to stick with the R3 for this year.

Q:

There has been some rain recently, how will that affect the roads?

AB:

It will be quite a problem. We use the hard tyres. The things will be complicated. On the recce we see the roads with the rain are not so easy. It's full of ruts and high water splashes. It will be quite hard and quite slippery.

Q:

You did not participate in shakedown this morning – why?

AB:

I was sleeping! No, we did a test on Monday. I drove the car for 30 kilometres. I saw the (shakedown) stage on the recce and thought it was not so useful. We had some new shock absorbers from the test, but the shakedown was not the right place to do it. We remain with the set-up from Monday. We still have something to do, but I feel comfortable.

Q:

Do you feel more pressure on this event, given it's your home round of the Championship?

AB:

There's a lot of pressure, but I usually drive better under pressure. I did the test which is good. In Jordan I had to start to learn the car at shakedown. This time I hope to have more experience before the stages.

Q:

The competition is very strong here...

AB:

Very strong competition. (Sébastien) Ogier and the Junior drivers are going very well. It will be a good fight between Martin (Prokop), (Patrik) Sandell and Ogier. Talking about me, the R3 is still not so competitive. In July we should have a new engine with more horse power. Now, though, it's trying to use the head and to get some points from the rally. Then, with the new engine, we can be more competitive,

Q:

Are you confident for this event?

AB:

I have done this rally eight times, so I know a lot of stages quite well. It will be a good fight for the top spot between Martin, Ogier and Sandell. We will try to stay behind them. Try to challenge for the third spot, but it will be difficult to challenge for the top spot. It's my home event, so I will try to do my best. We have good sponsorship from the local motorsport association and the event is organised by them – I want to do well.

Q:

Martin, it's been a difficult start to the year. How do you get your confidence back?

MP:

It's very difficult. For me the test was important. I've had a month rest and I feel relaxed and ready to fight. It was important for me to forget about Mexico.

Q:

We have the full entry of 17 JWRC drivers here in Sardinia. Why do you think everyone has chosen to do this event? You went testing before the event, how did it go?

MP:

Maybe it's the hardest rally in the Championship – except Argentina. But I don't know why (drivers all come to Sardinia). It's hard for the car. I really don't know. We need to make a good feeling with the car. It's important for me to get the confidence. In Mexico we had too many technical problems. This year, I'm not too confident with the C2, maybe because of driving the Group N car. But we had a good test in the Czech Republic.

Q:

Sébastien Ogier has won the first two Junior events of the season and is starting to get a healthy lead in the Drivers' Championship. What have you thought of his performance? Can you stop him getting a hat-trick of wins?

MP:

We will see. It was difficult for me. I didn't compare with his times in Mexico, my car was not in good condition. We will see in this race, but I'm not going to concentrate on him or (Patrik) Sandell. I will try and to my best job.

Q:

Some of the stages have been altered slightly, are there any that stand out as being particularly difficult?

MP:

Yes. This rally is the most difficult rally in Europe. This year the organisers made it the hardest rally. This year, the weather will make it very hard. We will see.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Marco Giordo

La Nuova Sardegna (Italy)

Q:

A question for Alessandro: how important was the help from the federation?

AB:

Very. We manage to find the sponsorship at the end of the entry for Jordan. So, it was three months trying to find the budget. This sponsorship from the ACI is very important – it's getting more and more difficult to find sponsorship. This is really good for us.