



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L' AUTOMOBILE

**2011 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP
RALLY ITALIA SARDEGNA**

Pre-event Press Conference
Thursday 5 May

Present:

Kris Meeke, MINI WRC Team
Sébastien Loeb, Citroën Total World Rally Team
Malcolm Wilson, Ford Abu Dhabi World Rally Team
Nick Shorrock, Michelin Competition

Q:

Kris, welcome to the WRC. There's been a lot of excitement, a lot of anticipation waiting for the MINI WRC team to arrive. How do you feel now it's happening?

KM:

It's quite nice to be here, it's nice to be back doing a rally; it's been seven months since I last competed so I'm a little bit rusty maybe. It was nice this morning to get out and settle the nerves a little bit. I think the engineers were a little bit more nervous than myself and Dani (Sordo) but it went quite well this morning. Being back in the WRC is good, but to be driving at this level is something I've always worked for. It's just a start for me, I want to make this a real goal and see what we can do. It's not going to happen overnight, we have to learn every rally and build it up slowly, step by step.

Q:

You mentioned a few nerves from the team but not from yourself and Dani. How was the car at shakedown this morning?

KM:

It was good. The road was a little bit difficult, there were some big stones coming out, and it was a little bit unrepresentative. It also was quite a soft road, it cut up quite bad towards the end, I was as confident as you can be on this type of road. It's one thing I feel from the car that every time you step into it you feel confident and confidence is a big part of rallying so it's good. I think we're ready for tomorrow morning.

Q:

Although MINI is registered as a WRC Team, you will not be scoring manufacturer points. Does that take the pressure off a little or are you not feeling any pressure as it's a development year?

KM:

To be honest, even if we were scoring points it would not be possible to fight for the Championship this year. We're quite lucky, especially myself, that we have six rallies this year where ultimately the result at the end of the weekend is not so important. If we do

have a kind of a problem on one stage over the weekend it doesn't really matter because we're not fighting for points. At the end of the day if we do get a good result it means we've had a good weekend and we want to have a good weekend so we will see. It doesn't really change our approach; we want to do the best job we can.

Q:

Talk to me about the number on your car; you've got number 52 on the side of your car – why?

KM:

I think everyone's fairly aware of the history MINI has in rallying, right back to the sixties. The numbers on Dani's car and my own car are the numbers of Paddy Hopkirk and Timo Makinen when they won the '64 and '65 Monte Carlo rallies. With its big history, everybody knows about MINI, it's a popular brand and it's nice to do something to remember the guys and pay respect to those guys who have achieved so much back then. Ultimately, when we're inside we don't see the numbers, we only want to go fast!

Q:

Sébastien, you are now in the lead of the World Rally Championship and with all the joys that brings it also means you are first on the road tomorrow. How are you feeling about that?

SL:

Always the same question. How I feel? I feel happy to be leading the Championship but being first on the road for sure is not an advantage in this kind of rally. It's usually very difficult so we will see what we can do but it's a bit always the same, so we will see if we see some strategy tomorrow night or not.

Q:

It's a little bit different here in Sardinia this time around; we are heading south down to Oristano; what did you think about them on the recce?

SL:

The stages were good, when we saw them they were a bit wet because it had been raining the day before so it's difficult to know exactly how sandy and how much gravel will be on the road but the profile of the stages was good, hard surface, they seem nice stages.

Q:

You've just got that fifteen minute remote service tomorrow, does that change your strategy, knowing you haven't got the ability to do a full service if anything does go wrong?

SL:

Yes, but what can we do. When you are fighting you have to push and then you sometimes take some risks. We know it's a bit more risky if something happens it might be difficult to continue but we will try to do as usual and hope that it will go well.

Q:

We're seeing MINI here for the first time, we're hearing there will be a VW announcement later today, the WRC is becoming very exciting again...

SL:

Yes, for sure, there are two new manufacturers coming, we've been only two since a few years so I think it's very good for the sport to have some new challenges. There will be more competition and for sure it will be more exciting. I think it's good for all the WRC.

Q:

What about yourself? Have you had any thoughts about what you might do next year?

SL:

I haven't decided yet.

Q:

Malcolm, when we look at the entry list for his event it's full of Ford Fiestas taking up nearly 55 per cent of the entries. 34 cars in total, that's pretty impressive!

MW:

It's great. I think we really achieved what we set out to achieve a few years ago, a complete ladder of opportunity within the Ford product range and of course we've been awarded the FIA WRC Academy as well. It was a great boost for us and for the little R2 car, of course there are the Super 2000 cars out as well. We've got 10 Fiesta WRC cars here as well so as you can imagine it's a great moment for us. As you can imagine a few more grey hairs and a lot of sleepless nights, but at the end of the day it's a great position to be in for Ford.

Q:

Let's look back to Jordan, it was a fantastic battle between Jari-Matti Latvala and Sébastien Ogier, who won the rally by point two of a second. Jari-Matti was incredibly disappointed as I am sure the team were. Have you recovered from that now and do you think Jari-Matti will bounce back even harder to try and take a win here?

MW:

The great thing is that we had fantastic pace on that second day in Jordan, in this particular rally I know that both Jari-Matti and Mikko (Hirvonen) really like the stages. He was already saying that if he took some big risks he thought he could pull out a bit more time and the biggest problem everybody knows is basically keeping Jari-Matti in control. The guys feel really confident, let's see.

Q:

Tell me about the Championship itself, is it going the way you planned from the start of the year or are things not quite on track?

MW:

They're not quite on track. It's really difficult when you lose a rally, now I can really understand and imagine how Sébastien (Loeb) felt in New Zealand when Marcus beat him by point three of a second because there's nothing like winning, so to be honest it's a big disappointment to lose by that margin, but I think it's fantastic for the sport to think that we have two intense days over that sort of distance and that's what rallies are being won by and that's the great thing about this sport and with the likes of MINI coming in as well they've seen they're competitive on the shakedown I think we've got quite a future.

Q:

Let's talk about the car itself. Are You happy with the Fiesta's progress?

MW:

Yes, we're very happy with the performance side; I think as you mentioned earlier when talking to Sébastien that tomorrow is the first for all of us to run a hundred or more kilometres without a real major service. I think ultimately at the end of the year the Championship will probably come down reliability and that will play a part in it and I think we're going to see some aspect of that probably tomorrow.

Q:

Last week I believe the team tested here in Sardinia, on gravel but also on asphalt with a gravel tyre – why was that?

MW:

We've never done that with this car, and the next event is Argentina, where there's one stage which has ten kilometres of tarmac, plus the fact we will have the Michelin soft compound tyre so it's the first time that we've tried that, and of course it was for many reasons but it was also for the drivers to see how the car reacted in gravel set-up on tarmac, to see how the new soft compound tyres worked and also to try and get a direction from a set-up point of view as to what we need to do when we go to events that have got asphalt sections in them.

Q:

Nick, Michelin returns to the WRC in 2011 – is it good to be back and has it been successful so far?

NS:

It's always good to be back in competitions where we can demonstrate what our tyres are meant to be doing. I guess the people to ask are really those around me today. From a tyre point of view we're more than happy with the performance we've seen so far, first of all starting off in Sweden with the snow tyre, a big success there. Obviously a lot of development work on the gravel tyre and that had a great start back in Jordan.

Q:

And that of course was the 'joker', effectively. You had good feedback from the teams from that?

NS:

You need to remember that the whole start of rallying for us at World Championship level started back in 2010 and we had to submit the tyres even before we'd run a kilometre in true race so we learned a lot from the first couple of rallies before we introduced the new tyre. Listening to people like Sébastien, the teams and Malcolm's comments led us to introduce this "joker" tyre, the second gravel tyre. The feedback was obviously very positive, I think just looking and listening to the Power Stage (in Jordan) was a good testament to what our tyres are capable of doing.

Q:

What will be the main challenges on the surface here in Sardinia?

NS:

Back to difficult conditions, a little bit like Mexico perhaps more demanding, perhaps something that we've not seen so far in 2011 is the impact of weather, very bold meteo that they can have here on this island. We've got some new conditions coming up and it'll be interesting to see how the tyres work out.

FIA SUPER 2000 WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Karl Kruuda

Albert Llovera

Q:

Karl you lead the SWRC as we come to Sardinia, did you imagine at the start of the year, coming to Sardinia, and that I'd be saying those words?

KK:

It's literally unbelievable. It's quite a miracle but I'm the only one who has scored points on both events so I think that is my advantage. Now I must try to take as many points as I can and keep my position

Q:

Consistency has been a key so far, hasn't it?

KK:

Yes, that is my main key, and I think I'm very good at it. There's nothing to say. I never do big mistakes and I think that's my plus.

Q:

Tell me about this event. You've obviously had a recce, and had a look around the island. What do you think, is this gravel event going to suit you?

KK:

I'm not quite sure. I was here two years ago, in the JWRC. I really like the roads, they are different from other roads, with big rocks. It's going to be difficult, but I hope it suits me and that I'll be fast here.

Q:

Albert, you're with the only Italian car represented in the World Championship, the Fiat Abarth – how much are you looking forward to competing this weekend?

AL:

I work with Italian people, not only with Abarth. Abarth is more than one make, one sponsor, in the last ten years I have been with Fiat, with Abarth, I think we've done a nice job together. I work with other Italian people from different firms, the hand-operated controls and driving aids are from an Italian company, the wheelchair is prepared by another firm, I am a Latin, just like the Italians, and I come from Andorra which is close to Italy too.

Q:

Tell me about how you drive. You obviously have an amazing amount of upper body strength, you drive entirely with your hands - can you explain to me a little bit about that?

AL:

Well, that's an obligation. I had an accident twenty years ago. I only use two hands. I have three circles on my steering wheel. There are two different circles, one in the front works when I push it towards my feet, that's the throttle. Another one works when I pull in my direction, that's the brakes, I have the clutch in the gearbox when I push the lever, same as in a motorcycle, and I have a handbrake. It's not difficult; it's easier for people like me who have a handicap than it would be for you. When you think "I must brake" the signal goes from the brain to your feet, for me it stops in the middle, it's a little easier for me. It's not easy to go very fast, my job for the last ten years has been to do something nice for handicapped people who need the driving in their everyday life.

Q:

You're certainly an inspiration to many people. Aside from rallying you've been very busy this year, you've been writing a book, you are also an ambassador for Unicef – tell me about those two things

AL:

In the last year I've been working with a big editor from Spain. It's not a book on racing, I explain a lot to racers about different things of life, what happens when one goes through an accident with spinal damage. I think one needs different information, not only

the people who have the accident, the family, their entourage, their partner. The book doesn't explain what one needs to do, but that life doesn't stop when one has an accident. Luckily there are other things, a family, I have four brothers in my home, I have really nice friends, these are the things that I explain. My friends are my family. It's important for a person that has an accident to know that I have overcome this problem. There are not only the races, I explain the Olympic Games in 1984, and different things.

Q:

As part of your role as a Unicef ambassador, what kind of things will you be doing?

AL:

Unicef needs sportsmen for their advertisement, last year I did a bit of work, starting with the Dominican Republic, where they have childrens schools. Life in Europe or the USA looks really different, it's good. There are many problems in the world. This year I think we'll go to Ecuador, Mali, and Mauritania. I'd like to go there because I did the Dakar in 2007, my car broke down there and I'd like to return. I think that I could do some work and do something good for the children. I think I'm a very lucky man, although I'm in a wheelchair my life is really nice, I race with a car, I have an orthopedist in Andorra, I have everything. I would like to give something in return to the children it would be perfect, as I am here today but might be dead in two weeks.

FIA WRC ACADEMY

Present:

Egon Kaur

Andrea Crugnola

Q:

Egon, it is the second round of the FIA WRC Academy, you won the first. How are you feeling now coming into the second one, has that given you a bit of a confidence boost after Portugal?

EK:

Sure, it's a boost of confidence knowing that I'm able to win, I have the speed, I have what it takes to win but I'm sure that the other drivers have improved since Portugal, they've analysed their mistakes and they'll definitely be better here, with speed and a better approach. If I want to have the same result here I have to be faster as well.

Q:

I believe you have a new co-driver this weekend. Why the change?

EK:

Unfortunately, a month ago when we had to sign the entry for the rally, Mike wasn't sure if he could join us for the season due to some duty he had back home so I decided to take no risk and to call Erik.

Q:

You won the Soviet Championship with Erik, is that right?

EK:

Yes, we won it last year with a 4-wheel drive Group N car.

Q:

So you have a lot of experience together, is it working right now?

EK:

Yes, we've been driving for half a year now, we had some practice two weeks ago and I think it went well.

Q:

How do you think this rally is going to suit you?

EK:

At first I thought I'd probably seen most of it in Portugal, but I was really wrong. The stages are really rough, you have to be careful but you have to be fast as well so it's really difficult to choose the right strategy.

Q:

You are leading the Championship now. Do you think you'll be able to hold on to that lead with a consistent course of action this weekend?

EK:

The other drivers are so fast. I'm not that fast to compete with them but I'll do my best and try to keep them behind me. From my experience I know that is impossible, but we'll see.

Q:

Andrea, rallying on Italian soil this weekend! How are you looking forward to rallying in Sardinia?

AC:

The rally is going to be very very hard, it's very rough, difficult, there are a lot of trees quite close to the road so it's hard to see all the corners. This is my first time in Sardinia and I would like to do a good race but I know it's not easy because I have a lot of team mates, they are very fast. I hope to do a good race.

Q:

How are you enjoying the WRC Academy experience so far? There's a lot going on, not just the race. You're learning a lot as well, you've been doing a lot of courses, how are you enjoying it all?

AC:

Yesterday we had a lesson with Petter Solberg, it was good to know him because he's a very fast driver. He's crazy, and I like his style.

Q:

What kind of advice has he given you, what kind of things did he teach you?

AC:

He told us to always go flat out!

Q:

How has everything gone this morning at shakedown, are you satisfied with the car?

AC:

I did three laps, it was only to get to know the car and the road. Here at shakedown the surface is very slippery.

Q:

What are you hoping to achieve this weekend? You took some good points from Portugal; do you think you can take more?

AC:

I think the right strategy is to go very slow. It's very important to use the brain on the first day because we only have a remote service zone, so it's going to be very hard.