



FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE

2019 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

RALLY ARGENTINA

Pre-event Press Conference

25 April March 2019

FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Thierry Neuville (BEL), Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team

Elfyn Evans (GBR), M-Sport Ford World Rally Team

Kris Meeke, Toyota Gazoo Racing World Rally Team

Esapekka Lappi (FIN), Citroën Total World Rally Team

Q:

Thierry Neuville, you are the championship leader coming into this event. How is the feeling right now, going into what maybe is going to be a tougher Rally Argentina than normal?

TN:

As we've just said ten minutes ago, a tougher race is waiting for us. Conditions have changed quite a lot since Tuesday, especially for the stages on the first day. We really don't know what to expect so it's going to be very challenging for us tomorrow and I'm sure we are going to see plenty of surprises.

Q:

What was it like at Shakedown this morning, how was that test with all the water that's been on it.

TN:

Honestly, Shakedown is like every year, very rough, especially on the second and third pass. You need to take care of your car if you still want to use it during the weekend, so we took it carefully. But we had a good feeling on the first pass, which is the most important pass as the conditions were probably more similar to what we are going to see tomorrow, at least on the first pass. The feeling is good, we know our cars have always been strong here in Argentina and I've also been the last two years on the podium with a first and second place. All is good so we are looking forward.

Q:

Last year it was a completely dry event so there was a lot of dust coming out behind the cars. We certainly won't have this on the first two days, which means we are going into the unknown in a way. Do previous results matter so much when the conditions are so changed?

TN:

Previous results actually never matter. There are very few events in which the same driver wins the same event the following year - especially now with such a close competition as it has been in the last few years. This means we can't really rely on that but, what is sure, is that Hyundai have always had a strong car in tough conditions. That's important for us drivers to know "Okay, our car is competitive in these conditions, we might be able to play for something big".

Q:

Elfyn Evans, we've seen you on very strong competitive form here in Argentina back in 2017 when the man next to you (Thierry Neuville) stole the win on the final stage. That was a thriller. Corsica for you was an incredible event, with so much consistency on pace from you, but the result wasn't what you expected. What do you come here with now, Elvyn? Do you come here carrying a bit of disappointment from Corsica or more as a positive outlook?

EE:

No, of course, Corsica is behind in any case. It's a very different dynamic to what we are about to face this weekend, so you know we start from a clean sheet of paper, just focused on doing the best job we can really, so Corsica is forgotten.

Q:

So we turn to this event that, as I mentioned before, in 2017 we saw great pace from you. Last year you went a little bit off the boil. Why was that?

EE:

I think last year I felt far below our own expectations. We didn't have a great weekend at all and so I hope we've made a few changes and a few things from last year that will help us improve for this year. Now so far I'm feeling the car is better. It is still an unknown rally. It's going to be tough out there, quite unpredictable I think. Let's wait and see what happens. We are going to give our best shot.

Q:

It's Friday the toughest day, would you say? A lot of people look at Sunday because we have such classic stages there but the premiere is quite slow, El Condor is very different... Is Friday a decisive day, do you feel?

EE:

They are all quite decisive, I don't think you can rule out any of the days and any of the stages, in fact. It was all already looking rough on some sections on the Friday stages, but we have had the heaviest rains, so we don't know what we are going to face. It could end up being very rough tomorrow, but then the sections on Saturday as well could be very demanding. There are very narrowing places and areas, so you can't discount any of the stages here.

Q:

Your team boss said this morning that he felt you've turned a corner in terms of performance, would you say that's true?

EE:

We are only four rallies into this season so it's probably a bit early to judge yet. For sure, things have been going well in the last three events and the feeling has been quite good. You know you can't take anything for granted like you said. Form changes so quickly and it's ultra competitive so we have to keep up working as hard as we can. Try to keep up the form and try to look actually for a few improvements. If we can take out a few stages from the last three rallies, our result would have been probably better again, so there's still plenty to work for.

Q:

Kris Meeke, in the past few years, we have seen you on the podium. It's an event for which you have a lot of experience. This year, you came straight into this event and scored a good result. How tough is it in comparison to the other events in the calendar? How challenging? How demanding?

KM:

It is always a challenge... Certainly in 2015, the year I managed to get my first victory here, it was really bad weather in the lead up to the event, the stages were in really bad conditions. That was quite a tough year. Like the weather has been this week, it's sort of a step in the unknown. For example for the Friday stages that we reced on Tuesday, meanwhile there has been some heavy rain so we don't know what we are going to see tomorrow - whether the rain has drained away or if the stages are still going to be flooded. So it is always a challenge. And the Shakedown is always a wakeup call because here, this road is not really a road as such, it's a track over some bedrocks. It's always incredibly rough out there. Tomorrow is going to be an adventure for sure.

Q:

You talked about the trickiness of the conditions yesterday - you mentioned black mud which is slippery as ice, can you explain a little about that please?

KM:

The stages are quite predominant sand soft but the grip is not so bad for sure. In the Saturday stages, even on some Friday stages, you have places where the colour changes and you know for sure it's going to be slippery. Where there are black mountains, it takes longer to dry out. Thierry will be the one to check these places first and see what they are like.

Q:

Kris, there is always a strategy in an event like this? Especially now with the weather changing and as you said into the unknown or when the feel is so competitive, do you have to be flat out constantly?

KM:

I think everyone goes in trying their best, it just depends on the feeling during the weekend for sure, you will know quickly after the first few stages whether you are going to crack them or not and then you can judge how your weekend is going to be or how you are going play it. For sure, everything is going to start tonight and we will achieve the best results we can. When the elements are against like this, there will probably be big time gaps. For sure the race is on right from the beginning.

Q:

Esapekka Lappi, it was your first time here in Argentina last year so you come back for the second time in a different team and different car. What is your expectation coming into this event?

EL:

For sure it will be very challenging as for everyone and the weather makes it very difficult. I guess, in the end, it may be good for me as I am a bit unexperienced over here. The guys probably haven't experienced such conditions before so in a way, it brings us to a certain equality level.

Q:

Esapekka Lappi, talk to me about your season so far. We have seen pace from you but maybe not the results. How would you describe 2019 from your seat? How do you feel it is going for yourself?

EL:

For sure, it's not been the perfect start so far, I mean, one good result out of four races, it is not actually what I wanted. We have had some bad luck as well but also I have done some mistakes which are not so good. On the last race, we struggled as a team a little bit, but there are still many races to go. Nothing is over yet and I'm ready to learn more.

Q:

What kind of preparation have you been doing for this event to get yourself ready?

EP:

I was two weeks at home playing with the kids and sometimes sleeping is limited but to be honest, everything was really fine, I mean, for sure I watched some on-boards as well, especially when the kids were sleeping during the day. But that's about it, normal stuff: watching on-boards, some physical training and then just relaxing my brain with the kids.

Q:

Your team have had fantastic results here in Argentina, I think 10 wins in total so this is a team with a huge volume of experience over the years. Does that give you confidence moving forward, all that information?

EP:

For sure, it gives a nice feeling in the end but I don't know if I can see it or feel it on the stage. To be honest, I hope they could take the experience into my hands but it's not actually how it works so I need to learn myself, unfortunately.

FIA WRC 2 PRO CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Gus Greensmith (GBR), M-Sport Ford World Rally Team
Marco Bulacia Wilkinson (BOL), Škoda Motorsport

Q:

Gus Greensmith, a really strong start to the year for you in the FIA WRC 2 Pro championship with a win on Rally Monte-Carlo. Argentina is yet another legendary event, what are the hopes for your second participation here?

GG:

The confidence is still the same. Sweden wasn't as good as we wanted it to be but the test here went very well. The speed is very good. The confidence is high, so I just have to put it together and try to do the same job.

Q:

It's going to be a difficult weekend here in Argentina as usual, a very demanding rally. Add to that the difficult weather conditions that we are seeing right now. You have limited experience here. How are you going to deal with all that? Is there a strategy in place?

GG:

Not really. I'm going to run as fast as I can obviously. This is going to be very rough in some places and we will have to adjust and think a bit more. I'm going to be pushing as hard as I can. The feeling in the Shakedown - in the first two passes - wasn't good because of a few set-up mistakes on my side but then we changed it and it was fine.

Q:

What was the problem with the set up and what changes did you make?

GG:

It looked more slippery than it actually was and the set-up was for a slippery conditions. Once we changed the set-up to what it should have been, it was fine. But by that point, the road was all destroyed and the time was not what it could have been.

Q:

Marco Bulacia Wilkinson, we saw a great performance from you on gravel in Rally Mexico a few weekends ago. You are exceptionally strong. Can you bring that kind of performance here to Argentina? Or do you feel you have little experience?

MB:

Yes, in Mexico we had a great battle with Benito (Guerra). That made a good rally for us and also for Benito too. For Argentina, we expect to have a good rally but the weather conditions are very changing, so we think it will be a very hard rally. I prefer not to think about that.

Q:

Yesterday it rained while you were in recce. How much more difficult was it in comparison to last year when you competed?

MB:

Last year, the roads were very dry on the stages on Friday and now those stages have a lot of water. So, it will be very hard. We will try to push a little but not too much because we have to protect the car. But we will try to do a good rally.

Q:

Marco, you are still so young. 18! What is the objective for you this year? Because we saw you fighting for the win in Mexico. What are you hoping for across the season?

MB:

I want to demonstrate that I can be fast.

FIA WRC 2 CHAMPIONSHIP

Present:

Pedro Heller (CHL)

Kajetan Kajetanowicz (POL)

Q:

Pedro Heller, we saw you very busy at the start of the year and you also won a rally event at home in Chile. You must be more than ready to go for this event. Is that so?

PH:

It was a nice rally. We won in our home, in a town called Los Angeles. Now, in Argentina it is different. It's my third time here. Last year, we did a podium and it was a very nice race. This year we have the same stages but with different conditions. A lot of rain and mud. But we are prepared for this and we hope to do a very nice rally this weekend.

Q:

As you mention, the conditions are very different. Last year it was very dry and hot. Does it change the way you approach the rally? Will you be a little more cautious or will you just go for it?

PH:

We will try to do our best. Obviously, it is different. But it is different for all the drivers, not just for us. If you prepare good pace-notes, maybe you can be able to do things well.

Q:

What kind of preparation have you been doing to get yourself ready?

PH:

For me, it is a big change because I changed my co-driver. Now, Marc Marti is next to me. He is a very experienced guy and he is teaching me a lot. In my short career in rally, I can say the most important thing is the pace-notes and I was failing on that. I asked Marc for help. So, we are trying to do the best in pace-notes. We changed the system, the way to take the notes and now I'm a little bit more committed. Also driving a little bit better, but of course with such an experienced partner by my side, it is easier to be committed with the rally and with the car.

Q:

Kajetan Kajetanowicz, welcome to Argentina and welcome back to the FIA WRC 2 Championship. Can you tell us your thoughts on your experience so far? Recce has gone well?

KK:

This is my debut here, first time. A big challenge. We did two days of recce and today, one loop in Shakedown just to check the car. Everything is working very well but to be honest, I'm a little bit disappointed because I still have not seen the special stage number 16, El Condor, because of the heavy fog. It is a strange feeling because it looked like a white wall in front of our car, at 20 meters. I hope I can discover the stage on Sunday.

Q:

Tell me about the feeling in the car this morning at Shakedown. It has been pretty wet. How does it feel like out there? Are you happy with the set-up?

KK:

Yes, this is my first time on gravel with this car, the Polo is great. The stages are very demanding, of course, many rocks. This is a very difficult rally even when it's dry. But if it is wet, it is completely difficult. Weather is changing, grip is changing. This is very difficult for me because it is my first time and the car is new.

Q:

What is the strategy considering you have no experience. Are you going to start with caution and build your pace as you go?

KK:

Yes, if you want to fight, I think... If you want to win, you cannot push 100 per cent. This is my opinion, but I have no experience here. It is not even 99 per cent, it is 80 per cent. And this is my strategy. If you are driving 80 per cent, you can't be sure to finish this rally, anyway. But this is Rally Argentina. I'm very happy to be here.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Pablo Schillaci
FOX Sports

Q:

Marcos Bulacioa Wilkinson and Pedro Heller, do you think being in Argentina will foster your chances for a win in your category this weekend?

PH:

I think I have chances. This is my first time here in Argentina. You need a strategy for this rally. I think going 100% is not the right thing to do, even less with these rainy conditions. Fortunately, the stages are the same as last year, only on different conditions. We have to be very careful, which doesn't mean you must be slow, but you have to be as efficient as possible, taking care of the car and trying to get to the end. That's the most important. Our Shakedown today was quite good but there are many things to improve. We have to carefully follow our pace-notes and try to be calm in adverse conditions.

MB:

I think I have chances even if this is a difficult rally and even worse with the weather conditions that made everything more difficult. Any previous strategy had to be changed, this rally can go to anyone. Every time we come to Argentina, we expect it to be difficult with rough roads. We have practised a lot, we have prepared ourselves physically and following the pace-notes with the videos so we hope we will do well.