

57th Rally Finland (August 2–5, 2007) Imminent take-off for Citroën as WRC action resumes

After an eight-week break, the 2007 World Rally Championship is about to get back into full swing. To get the second half of the season started on a high note, the action resumes with Finland's roller-coaster ride for which Citroën Sport has entered two C4 WRCs for Sébastien Loeb/Daniel Elena and Dani Sordo/Marc Martí.

The final run-in to the year sees the World Championship regulars face a programme of eight rounds in the space of just four months, and what better way could there be to get the ball rolling than the year's fastest fixture? The legendary feature of the Jyväskylä region's gravel roads which skirt vast lakes and hug the gently undulating countryside is of course the abundance of jumps that launch the cars high into the air. "It's an extremely fast rally. You're on the limit from start to finish," says Sébastien Loeb. "And of course there are all the jumps, many of which are followed by concealed corners. The challenge during recce is to gauge just how far you are likely to jump and at what speed you will take off. When the road turns after the crest, it's best to get your landing just right, and facing the right direction!"

The specific characteristics of the championship's ninth round make local knowledge more important here than on any other event visited by the WRC, and that will be especially the case this time round since 46% of the tests are new. The first leg will take crews west of Jyväskylä, near Keuruu, while Jämsä will provide the backdrop for the second day's action to the southwest. The final leg will take survivors to the Laukka region, to the north-east. The two Citroën drivers are taking the introduction of new stages philosophically: "The locals learned to drive on these roads," observes Dani Sordo. "They know them by heart and that's a big advantage. I've only done this event one before in a WRC car, so I've still got a great deal to learn." "Just when I was beginning to find my marks," adds Seb! "It's obviously a key factor that promises to make the weekend even more complex."

For the championship's highest-flying fixture, Citroën's drivers know they will be able to count on an important ally in the C4 WRC. "Straight into our pre-event test programme," reports Seb, "my car felt nicely balanced and that's vital for Finland. We then worked with the team to fine-tune the set-up to make it even more competitive across the full range of conditions." Dani echoes Seb's comments: "Over the different test stages we used, the C4 responded well. Its consistency and progressive handling are good for confidence and will allow us to push as hard as we choose to."

For Citroën, the mission in Finland will be simple: to maintain contact with its rivals and, if possible, score points. For that, the two drivers have their own approach: "I know I've still got a great deal to learn in these forests," accepts Dani. "It can be easy to make a mistake, and it only takes one... So I won't be out to keep up with the front-runners at all costs. I will endeavour to finish as close to them as possible in order to come away with Manufacturers' points."

Meanwhile, Seb is just nine points adrift of the provisional championship leader and has higher ambitions for the weekend: "It's quite simple really... I will do what I can to win. I will push to begin with and then see where we stand. That said, I can't afford to risk throwing everything away either because that would simply make matters worse. Our situation isn't easy but it could all change very quickly because Marcus Grönholm isn't immune from making a mistake either."

"Finland isn't the easiest of venues to resume the championship because it's one of the most complex events of the year," says Guy Fréquelin. "We will need a top result to keep our chances alive in both championships. Because of his lack of experience, it won't be easy for Dani Sordo. He and Marc Martí must try to score as many points as possible for Citroën. Sébastien Loeb and Daniel Elena are fully aware of the situation and will be out to win, but they also know that complicating an already difficult picture wouldn't be a smart idea."

Questions to...

Guy Fréquelin...

The eight-week break must have done the team a great deal of good before the final run-in...

"With all the preparation we've been doing for the coming rounds – including testing and Sébastien Loeb's entry in the Donegal Rally plus Dani Sordo's participation in the O.K. Ralli in Finland – the break hasn't exactly been a holiday. True, it enabled everyone at Citroën Sport to take a bit of a breather but we haven't lost any of our motivation and we go to Jyväskylä extremely focused on our objectives."

With eight rounds still to come, Citroën and Sébastien Loeb are second in their respective championships. You face a big challenge...

"We indeed face two big challenges during the second half of the championship. Nothing is over yet and there are still eight rallies to come. We know it won't be easy but our crews and everyone at Citroën Sport intend to give it everything they've got to reverse the trend. Given the points scoring system, we will need to drop as few points to our rivals as possible to stand a chance of winning a WRC title. That promises to be difficult, even though there are four asphalt rounds still to contest. The second half of the season doesn't start with the simplest of events either since Finland is home soil for our rivals."

What makes this rally so special? How do you explain that Citroën and Sébastien have never won here?

"It's a very specific event. The locals know the roads by heart and that will be especially important this year given how much of the total stage distance is new. In addition to the constant high speeds, the frequent blind corners and crests make it even more complicated. In recent years, Sébastien has been very close to Marcus Grönholm and I have every faith in both him and the team. It also seems that the C4 represents a step forward in performance terms compared with our most recent visits. We'll see if that's sufficient to enable us to challenge for victory."

Sébastien Loeb...

What does going for almost a month without driving the C4 feel like? Will Finland be a fresh start?

"The break was nice but I wouldn't exactly call this a fresh start because we can't just dismiss all that's already happened this year. It was great to be able to unwind a little away from the stages but it wasn't something I would have liked to see last too long! The difficulty will be finding the ideal pace straight away, especially since Finland isn't the easiest round to get back into the swing of things..."

You are currently in the role of chaser, with eight opportunities to bridge the points gap...

"We will need to hit the ground running and find our marks again as early as the shakedown test. I have nine points to make up and I can't afford to make any more mistakes. To have a chance, Daniel and I will need to beat our rivals which means we will have to push hard. Unlike last year, I will be second on the road on Day 1 and that will enable us to see Marcus Grönholm's lines. That's always a plus."

Winning in Finland was one of your objectives. Is that still the case given your position in the championship?

"It's true that this is an event I want to win but I want to win it against Marcus Grönholm. It wouldn't have the same flavour without him. It's here that he started out and he is doubtlessly more motivated here than anywhere else. It's not that I'm not competitive in Finland, it's Marcus who feels particularly at home! As usual, I will start the rally with the intention of winning. If that means taking big risks, I will ease off. If, on the other hand, it looks as though I can match his pace, I will give it my best shot..."

and to Dani Sordo

How do you feel after your time off?

"Good, thanks. These breaks are important to give you a chance to take a bit of a step back, so long as they don't last too long! If someone had been forced me to go rallying every weekend, I wouldn't have complained! Staying at home is time wasted. I tried to keep busy by doing a little sport to stay fit. After a month off, you lose the notion of pace and there's a risk of being bit slow on the uptake when you arrive in Finland when, on the contrary, you really need to be raring to go."

How did pre-Finland testing go?

"I'm very pleased with what we accomplished. Everything went well and I believe we are ready. To cover as many different types of terrain as possible, we used a number of different test stages and I immediately found my marks again with the C4. The set-up is reassuring and competitive not only over the fast roads with jumps that we covered at average speeds of almost 145kph, but also over the narrower, slower stuff."

Is Finland one of your favourite rallies? What is your objective for this year's event?

"This is actually only my second attempt at this event in a WRC car. It's a rally that calls for considerable experience if you're looking to finish on the podium. That won't be my case this year. I do like the stages, though, but that goes for any rally driver. They're fast and call for long power-slides, not to mention the jumps... Fantastic! They also demand total concentration however, as well as good notes so that you never find yourself having to hesitate. The O.K. Ralli at the beginning of July helped me gain extra experience of the terrain, but the level of the competition will be completely different in Jyväskylä where I will be looking to score as many points as I can for Citroën."

The 2007 Rally Finland in brief...

* This will be the 57th Rally Finland to be organised. From 1951 until 1953, the event was known as the Jyväskylän Suurajot (the Great Race of Jyväskylä). From 1954 until 1996, it was called the 1000 Lakes Rally, a name that is still frequently employed today.

* All the event's facilities (Service Park, Event HQ, Media Room and Parc Ferme) will once again be based either just outside or inside Jyväskylä's Paviljonki. This university town is situated at the northern tip of Lake Päijänne, 270km north of Helsinki.

* The total length of the 2007 event is 1,382.33km, including 362.26km divided into 23 stages (17 different).

* The time difference between Finland (GMT+3) and CET is one hour. When it is 8pm in Jyväskylä, it is 7pm in Paris. The local currency is the Euro.

* Recce is scheduled for Tuesday July 31 (between 07.00 and 19.00 – SS2/5, 8, 9, 10, 3/6, 4/7, 21,

22 and 23) and Wednesday August 1 (between 07.00 and 19.00 – SS13, 14/16, 12, 18, 15, 17/19, 20 and 1/11). Two passes at specific times and a maximum speed of 80kph.

* Shakedown takes place on Thursday August 2 between 08.00 and 12.00. The usual 3.76km test stage 6km north of the service park will be used.

* The Rally Show takes place at the service park between 16.00 and 16.30.

* The rally starts at 19.20 from the Paviljonki service park.

* Engines: The engines of both Citroën C4 WRCs will be new for this event and sealed before going on to be used in Germany. The chassis used in Finland are not paired with another event.

* Two gearboxes are available per car for the rally.

* Tyres – the quota per driver is 56 tyres, of which 40 may be used (event + shakedown). Barcode lists and the two pattern choices had to be nominated by Wednesday July 25.

* Leg 1 (Thursday August 2 and Friday August 3): 591.28km, including 130.03km divided into 11 stages (7 different). Thursday: rally starts from the service park at 19.20. SS1 (Killeri Super-special 1, 2.06km). Cars enter parc ferme by 20.27. Friday: cars leave parc ferme for Service A (07.00, 10 minutes). SS2 (Vellipohja 1, 16.20km), SS3 (Mökkiperä 1, 13.50km) and SS4 (Palsankylä 1, 12.70km). Regroup, Paviljonki (10.42, 10 minutes). Service B (10.52, 30 minutes). SS5 (Vellipohja 2), SS6 (Mökkiperä 2) and SS7 (Palsankylä 2). Regroup, Paviljonki (14.54, 10 minutes). Service C (15.04/30 minutes). SS8 (Urria, 10km). SS9 (Lautaperä, 8.80km), SS10 (Jukojärvi, 22.31km) and SS11 (Killeri Super-special 2). Service D (20.27/45 minutes). Last car into parc ferme at midnight.

* Leg 2 (Saturday August 4): 603.68km, including 188.56km divided into 9 stages (7 different). Cars leave parc ferme for Service E (06.00, 10 minutes). SS12 (Kaipolanvuori, 12.00km), SS13 (Juupajoki, 25.74km) and SS14 (Ouninpohja 1, 33.11km). Regroup, Paviljonki (10.58, 10 minutes). Service F (11.08, 30 minutes). SS15 (Leustu, 21.20km), SS16 (Ouninpohja 2). Regroup, Jämsä (14.13, 10 minutes). Remote service, Jämsä (14.23, 15 minutes), SS17 (Ehikki 1, 14.95km), SS18 (Himos, 18.50km), SS19 (Ehikki 2) and SS20 (Surkee, 15.00km). Service G (18.40, 45 minutes). Last car into parc ferme at 22.00.

* Leg 3 (Sunday August 5): 187.57km, including 43.67km divided into 3 stages (3 different). Cars leave parc ferme for Service H (09.20, 10 minutes). SS21 (Valkola, 13.10km), SS22 (Lankamaa, 23.00km) and SS23 (Ruuhimäki, 7.57km). Rally ends at 13.30.

* The finish ceremony takes place in the Paviljonki from 13.30.

* Note: 46% of the stages are new. Only Killeri (SS1/11), Urria (SS8), Jukojärvi (SS10) and Ruuhimäki (SS23) are identical to 2006. Certain stages have been modified compared with 2006 or use parts of stages employed in previous years: 2km different to 2006 at the end of Vellipohja (SS2/5), 1.30km different at the start of Mökkiperä (SS3/6), 1km at the end of Leustu (SS15). The other stages are completely new: Lautaperä (SS9), Kaipolanvuori (SS13) and Valkola (SS21). A remote service zone has been organised in Jämsä.

* Citroën has one previous win to its name in Finland. That was with Pauli Toivonen/Jaakko Kallio who won with a DS19 in 1962.

* Sébastien Loeb and Daniel Elena have contested Rally Finland on seven previous occasions. Five with the Xsara: 2006 (2nd), 2005 (2nd), 2004 (4th), 2003 (5th) and 2002 (10th), one with the Saxo Kit-Car in 2001 (1st, Super 1600) and one with a Saxo Challenge in 2000 (retired).

* Dani Sordo has done the event twice before, in 2006 (Citroën Xsara/Marc Martí, retired) and in 2005 (Citroën C2 S1600/Marc Martí, 1st JWRC).

* Marc Martí has started Rally Finland eight times: 2006 (Dani Sordo/Citroën Xsara, retired), 2005 (Dani Sordo/Citroën C2 S1600, 1st JWRC), 2004 (Carlos Sainz/Xsara WRC, 3rd), 2003 (Carlos Sainz/Xsara WRC, 4th), 2000 (Jesús Puras/Mitsubishi Evo VI, retired), 1999 (Jesús Puras/Subaru WRX, retired), 1998 (Oriol Gómez/Seat WRC, retired), 1997 (Oriol Gómez/Seat GTi 16V, 23rd overall and 6th in the two-litre class).

* A privately-run Xsara WRC has been entered by OMV Kronos Citroën World Rally Team for Manfred Stohl/Ilka Minor.

Live results, interviews with members of the team and news updates after every service halt at www.citroen.com.

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