

# 2004 World Rally Championship by Max Etak

Almost a year ago, the 2004 World Rally Championship season started as any does, full of questions and promise. Would Petter Solberg be able to defend his Driver's title against fellow "young-guns" Sebastian Loeb and Marko Martin? Would the level of competition be the same now that three of the heavy-weights were absent? Richard Burns was giving '04 a miss while doctors treated him for a brain tumour, Colin McRae had not secured a contracted drive and Tommi Makinen was enjoying his first months of retirement from competition.

Peugeot had a new car in the 307 and a seasoned team to campaign it. Mitsubishi were back with the latest Lancer WRC04. Mexico and Japan were joining the series to boost it to 16 events.

The season began as always with the Monte Carlo rally but it was the Swedish rally in February that was to provide foreshadowing of how the championship battle might go. Seb Loeb and co-driver Daniel Elena becoming the first non-Scandinavian competitors ever to win this specialized event.

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The Rally Argentina saw another record broken, this time by veteran Carlos Sainz when his first place made him the "winningest" driver in the WRC at 26 career victories.



photo - Keith Morrison

"El Matador" Carlos Sainz, maximum attack.

Peugeot were disappointed to be achieving only partial success by the halfway point. Granted they would go on to win the Finnish rally but the 307 was not the instant rally-winner the 206 had been, right from the get go. By mid-summer Mitsubishi had realized that the newest Lancer was not scoring and the manufacturer decided to withdraw from competition for the rest of the season, even missing its home event at the debut Japanese rally.

Rally Deutschland fell to Loeb for the third year in a row, this is the closest event to home for him geographically and one of his favourites.

The British round of the series had a new date and expected dry conditions. How was this going to change the nature of the rally without the traditional November mud and sludge? Not a bit, it can deluge just as effectively in September in Wales and true to recent history, Petter Solberg is the reigning master with this year's victory making it a hat-trick of Anglo wins.

In Corsica, Marko Martin won his first ever WRC victory. Too bad this significant accomplishment was lost in Sebastian Loeb's glory as he sealed the World Championship with two rounds to go. By year-end, Loeb had won six of the year's rallies, a feat that ties him with Didier Auriol for most wins in a season.

Also by year-end, Carlos Sainz had announced he would retire from competition. His career started in 1980 with Renaults and moved to dealer Fords before making the step to Toyota Team Europe where he won two WRC titles in 1990 and '92. He enjoyed continued success (Sainz has finished 5th or better in the championship 10 times in the last 12 years) with many teams and has always been an example of sportsmanship and one of the sports greatest ambassadors.

2005 is looming now and we can begin to speculate and wonder what the next season will bring.

"This unit has everything you need to zero every stage."  
Peter Parsonage

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