

World Rally Championship

With it's stages in and around the Tokachi region of Japan's northern Island, Hokkaido, Rally Japan comes back for it's second showing since it's very successful inception last season. As teams were preparing for the fast flowing gravel, Colin McRae was still in negotiation with Skoda. Looking for a long-term commitment, he was preparing to run in Australia, with a possible full time return to WRC in 2006. Daniel Carlsson is expected to do well standing in for Markko Martin, who is sitting out after the horrific crash that took the life of Michael Park.

In the final shakedown, it was Chris Atkinson who took his Subaru to top the times, raising some eyebrows as this is his first year at this top level. He was four seconds faster than his teammate Petter Solberg. As the stages progress, Solberg and Gronholm battle neck and neck.

Solberg carries a narrow lead most of the way until SS25 where Solberg hits a rock and damages his car's steering - 25km from the end of the Rally! Loeb moves up into 2nd, and Gronholm takes the lead.

Gronholm tops the times in the final stage to seal his win, while Loeb takes care to

finish. His second place on the podium will be enough to secure the drivers title for the season, and as the rally drew to a close, the Citroen driver put his name in the record books for winning back-to-back titles. A feat accomplished by other memorable names such as Juha Kankkunen, Tommi Makinen and Massimo Biasion.

"I didn't want to get at all involved in the battle with Petter and Marcus." Loeb commented on his 'easy does it' strategy. Chris Atkinson posts an impressive third place finish, drawing easy praise from his team boss David Lapworth.

"Chris put a tick in all the boxes this weekend," Lapworth commented on the driver's strong placing, "He has driven consistently, fast, under pressure and on some extremely difficult roads and I'm sure he'll benefit a lot from the experience."

The circuit moves to the Rallye de France. Nicknamed the rally of 10000 corners, drivers must stay alert; cornering technique is everything! On the Island of Corsica, drivers are navigated between towering cliffs on one side, and precipitous drops on the other. Tire choice as always is critical,

as the abrasive roads are often covered with loose material, causing a threatening lack of grip. Top that off with a rain forecast as the weekend approached.

As the man who would be the 2005 champion, Loeb hits hard from the start, taking stages one after another. Teammate Duval, hoping to help Citroen win its third manufacturer's title, starts well, but exhibits some braking trouble by SS6, where he had dropped to fifth place. Duval continues to work hard until SS9, where, with only a 24.6s deficit, he rolls the Xsara, costing a massive 2m40.3s on the stage. Naturally, the often quote-worthy Frequelin is disappointed by the Belgian's indiscretion. Toni Gardemeister places second. "It's my best asphalt performance. I felt sure I could take a good result because I knew the Focus RS is a great car on asphalt." Petter Solberg takes the third spot, followed by Sarrazin, Kresta and Bengue in fourth, fifth and sixth respectively.

As the teams readied for the Movistar Rally Catalunya in Spain, the WRC news announced the return of Colin McRae, driving for Skoda in a one-off run in Australia. As

well, Citroen confirms their planned return to the circuit in 2007. "The new regulations allow us to meet our budget targets. There is no longer anything standing in the way of our return to the sport." Said Guy Frequelin, team boss for Citroen.

The rally got off to a good start, but SS7 was cancelled due to severe overcrowding. The drivers would receive nominal times. Markus Gronholm was holding a solid third place, but was forced to retire after puncturing his radiator, and losing power on the way back to service. The engine damage was too severe to continue on, giving Citroen it's third consecutive title. Gronholm's problem also gave him difficulty in securing second place in the driver's standings as well. With Petter Solberg having gone off earlier, Gronholm would have

liked the points. As it is, the two will move on to the final round in Australia, matched at 71 points each.



!!! Caution - Kangaroos next 10 km