

## The Loudon-clear guide to... **the FIA 2017 World Rally Championship**

After all the talk, the hype and the hysteria, the World Rally Championship's most eagerly anticipated season is almost upon us. It's true: 2017 and a new chapter and the next generation in our sport is here.

Here's my guide to the revolution – the one we're all talkin' about...

### **The cars: an overview**

Lighter, leaner, meaner and – on some stages – as much as a second per kilometre faster. That's not a step, that's a leap and a gigantic one at that. Last year was a season of frustration for most of the drivers, tasting the future while testing 2017 cars, only to have to step back to 2016 machinery for competition. Not any more. The future's arrived and Citroen, Hyundai, M-Sport Ford and Toyota's rally missiles are 10 kilos lighter, 55mm wider and as much as 25 per cent more powerful.

In addition to all that pace and performance, and thanks to tireless work from the FIA and the FIA Institute's Closed Car Research Group over the last eight years, these cars will go down the road packed with more safety features than any other rally car before them.

Aside from the technical regulation changes, there have been tweaks to the sporting rules to make the 2017 competition as fair as possible while coverage of the World Rally Championship will be more accessible than ever before, courtesy of a new agreement between WRC Promoter and Red Bull TV.

In short, life in the WRC's never been better.

### **The exterior**

Stand any 2017 car alongside its predecessor and the differences couldn't be more obvious – certainly not in terms of size. This season means cars with a front splitter which runs 60mm further forward, while the rear overhang stretches back an extra 30mm. The wheel arches are wider and run out of and into the front and rear bumper. And then there's that extra 55mm of width, offering sensational stability and further enhanced safety courtesy of a steel beam running the length of the doorsill. The enormous rear wing will slow the cars down in a straight line (by causing more drag), but will also provide more rear grip and higher cornering speed than ever before. That wing itself sits 50mm higher than the roofline.

There are more scoops, grills and gouges than ever, sucking cool air in to chill brakes and engine with the hot stuff spat out from more holes and hollows.

### **The interior**

From their seats, the driver and co-driver won't see any dramatic changes in terms of furniture in their office. What they will notice is that they're sitting even closer together and even further away from the outside world. Once

stage mode is engaged, they won't see each other at all. Their helmets will be closer – now just 50mm – away from the enhanced wrap-around head protectors. Seat technology has moved on further with significant development in turning seats into their own safety cell in the event of an accident.

That added space between the crew and the outer reaches of the 2017 World Rally Car has been filled with more energy-absorbing foam than ever (at least 240mm rather than 200mm in the 2016 cars); this extra foam – allied to other measures such as roll cage design and a carbon fibre door panel complete with honeycomb aluminum for added strength – means a potential increase in energy management of 20 per cent. Energy management is vital in an accident and the ability to transfer that energy throughout the shell is a major step forward in crew safety.

### **The engine**

The headlines are straightforward: bigger turbo, bigger restrictor and more power. But, there's so much more to 2017 than just bolting a bigger blower fed through a wider mouth to the side of four cylinders. Engines have been redesigned and rebuilt incorporating other technical changes such as, for example, the increase in bore diameter to 84mm.

As well as the pursuit of ultimate power and performance, engine design reflects the need to balance combustion pressure with durability. The motors need to be fast and they need to last.

The big number is 380bhp – up from the FIA's previous figure of 300. The power hike comes from the bigger restrictor, but containing the boost to 2.5-bar ensures the level of torque from the engine remains roughly the same as before (around 430Nm). What this means is that on the tight, twisty stages, the cars will be running at around the same speed. But on the quick stuff, with the cars in top gear, the scenery will be passing faster than ever before. In places like Finland and Poland, the new cars will be out of this world.

### **The transmission**

The six-speed sequential gearbox remains in place for this season, as does the hydraulically operated paddle shift. But, like the differentials, driveshafts and propshaft feeding the power to the car's four corners, the 'box has been upgraded, strengthened and made ready for more power than ever before to be shot through.

The big change in this area is, however, the return to an active centre differential for the first time since 2010. Even mated to passive front and rear differentials, the active centre will allow the driver to tune the car's handling to the specific conditions far easier than ever before. The FIA will implement a restriction of three different maps for the centre, which brings some limitations.

The manufacturers were keen on this change not just to see an improvement in their car's handling, but also for the extra durability the active centre is likely to deliver, with less stress being put through the rest of the transmission. One leading engineer described the inclusion of an active centre differential as a shock absorber for the powertrain.

## **The season ahead...**

### FIA World Rally Championship 2017

Round 1: Rallye Monte-Carlo (January 19-22) Based: Gap/Monaco  
Traditional season-opening dash up and down the French Alps in snow, slush, ice and sunshine.

Round 2: Rally Sweden (February 9-12) Based: Karlstad  
The WRC's very own winter wonderland where crews face temperatures as low as -30 and tackle snow and ice-laden forest roads.

Round 3: Rally Guanajuato Mexico (March 9-12) Based: Leon  
The first gravel round of the season and the highest of the high altitude rallies, with most stages run in baking temperatures at around 2000 metres.

Round 4: Tour de Corse – Rallye de France (April 6-9) Based: Bastia  
This really is a tour of the French Mediterranean island, with asphalt action in three of Corsica's four corners.

Round 5: Rally Argentina (April 27-30) Based: Villa Carlos Paz  
The South American WRC round is one of the season's highlights with close to a million fans watching from stage-side in the Pampas.

Round 6: Rally de Portugal (May 18-21) Based: Matosinhos  
Hugely popular event run on the technical and tricky roads around Porto in the north of the country.

Round 7: Rally d'Italia Sardegna (June 8-11) Based: Alghero  
The temperature's really cranked up on the mid-summer stages in Sardinia – this one will be the toughest test of survival on the rugged gravel roads.

Round 8: Rally Poland (June 30-July 2) Based: Mikolajki  
The eighth round of the championship takes crews on a super-fast trip through the Polish Lake District.

Round 9: Rally Finland (July 27-30) Based: Jyvaskyla  
The fastest rally of the season – and set to be quicker than ever this year. Finland is the one everybody wants to win.

Round 10: Rallye Deutschland (August 17-20) Based: Trier  
The first chance to see the new cars on an all-asphalt event as the crews head for the vineyards and military roads around Trier.

Round 11: Rally RACC Catalunya – Costa Daurada (October 5-8) Based: Salou  
The WRC's only mixed-surface rally of the year. Crews compete on gravel on the opening day before switching to fast, smooth asphalt for the weekend.

Round 12: Wales Rally GB (October 26-29) Based: Deeside  
Classic European finale to the WRC season, with ever-changing grip levels on the Welsh forest roads testing the crews to the maximum.

Round 13: Rally Australia (November 17-19) Based: Coffs Harbour  
Tricky New South Wales gravel stages run in the height of the southern hemisphere summer bring the season to a close down under.

### **Sporting changes**

The biggest change in sporting regulations for this year surrounds the start order. For 2017 (FIA World Motor Sport Communication, Vienna 30.11.16):

*Day 1: All cars start in accordance to the championship classification.*

*Day 2: P1 drivers start in reverse order of the actual classification after day 1. Other drivers start in order of rally classification.*

*Day 3: P1 drivers start in reverse order of the actual classification after day 2. Other drivers start in order of rally classification.*

*P1 drivers re-starting under Rally 2 will start at the end of the P1 group.*

*The start order of the first rally of the championship will be based on the championship classification of the previous year.*

NB. The FIA's definition of a P1 driver is: *drivers of World Rally Cars entered by a manufacturer and approved by the FIA.*

*P2 – drivers entered with older specification World Rally Cars.*

*P3 – drivers entered by a competitor eligible to score points in the WRC2 Championship.*

Manufacturers no longer need to nominate a lead driver at the start of the season. Nominations of first, second and third potential point-scoring drivers need to be nominated by the closing date for entries on each individual rally. The top two of three drivers will score manufacturer points.

On the subject of points, the top five fastest times on each event's Powerstage will now be rewarded, rather than just the top three. Fastest time will net five bonus points, while fifth quickest gets one.

The FIA has sanctioned a WRC Trophy for drivers competing in pre-2017 World Rally Cars. Crews will count their highest six scores from seven possible scoring rallies.

M-Sport and DMACK will run the 2017 Junior World Rally Championship. The arrive-and-drive series uses M-Sport's ground-breaking Ford Fiesta R2s and

includes WRC rounds in France, Italy, Poland, Finland, Germany and Spain. Seven 2018 prize-drive outings in a Ford Fiesta R5 will be split into three pairs events: the crew accumulating the most points from France and Italy; Poland and Finland; Germany and Spain will win two WRC2 outings each. The overall champion awarded the seventh outing.

Both the WRC2 and WRC3 series remain in place for next season.

**Stuart Loudon's key event:** Rallye Monte-Carlo (January 19-22)

Which round of the world championship am I looking forward to the most? That's always a tricky one: Argentina's always a classic, Finland's a favourite and then there's the Tarmac... But this year it's all eyes on the Alps. I can't remember a time when there's been so much excitement and focus on the 21.25-kilometre (13.20-mile) road between Entrevaux and Ubraye, which starts at 2014 on Thursday January 19. The Monte's always an absolute thriller, but with this year's new cars it's going to be bigger and better than ever.

**Stuart will be watching...** #1 Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Ford Fiesta WRC).

Just a couple of months ago, the prospect of Sébastien Ogier driving a Ford Fiesta WRC in the World Rally Championship was simply mad. The champ's future was with Volkswagen. Until Volkswagen's future in the WRC was brought to an abrupt halt. Ogier, Ingrassia and their Polo have been the masters of our world for the last four years. But that's history now. M-Sport's fastest Frenchmen start from scratch in just over a fortnight.

**Stuart Loudon** is a semi-professional co-driver who has started 88 rallies, 19 of which are rounds of the World Rally Championship and one of which was with an Ashes-winning English cricketer. He makes biscuits in the family business when he's not working towards his dream of becoming a factory co-driver in the WRC.

*Stuart Loudon and Words PR work their socks off to make sure every last dot and detail of the document is 100 per cent accurate – but we can't be responsible for any changes to the itinerary or stage distances.*