

News release
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Stuart's weather work helps keep world-leader M-Sport on track

M-Sport is leading this year's World Rally Championship and Glasgow's Stuart Loudon is right at the heart of an ultra-successful season so far for the Cumbrian firm.

M-Sport World Rally Team produces the fastest Ford Fiestas anywhere on the planet. On ice, mud, gravel or asphalt, M-Sport's Fiesta WRC offers similar levels of acceleration to a Formula 1 car and an ability to deal with all sorts of terrain changes at 100mph.

Next week, the World Rally Championship visits the fastest event of them all: Rally Finland. Known as the grand prix of gravel, the cars and crews will average close to 80mph through the Finnish forests, often flying more than 40 metres over some of the sport's most famous jumps.

Crucial to success next week is information about the road ahead and the weather overhead. That's where M-Sport's weather crew co-ordinator Stuart comes in.

What's your job with the M-Sport World Rally Team?

SL: I co-ordinate where the weather crews will be going on the rally.

What's a weather crew?

SL: It's a person who's sent out into the stages to report back on weather conditions and, some times more importantly, road conditions.

Do you rely solely on the people in the stages?

SL: No, not at all. The team has a fantastic relationship with Meteo France. We have a Meteo France person working with us on all events – remotely on gravel events and on location on asphalt rallies.

Tell us more about the co-ordination side?

SL: We have a lot of weather and condition data coming in from Meteo France and from the guys out in the field and I collate that and feed it to the crews in a quick, digestible form. Don't forget, sometimes there's just a couple of minutes between stages and the crews need to know very quickly what's going on and what to expect in the next one.

In Rally Finland next week, some of the stages are 25km (15.5 miles) long, how do you decide where the weather information crew will go?

SL: I'll have a detailed look at the stage and make that decision myself on Wednesday, but we then have a meeting with Seb [Ogier], Ott [Tanak] and Elfyn [Evans] and their co-drivers after shakedown to go through the weather plan and if they've seen anything on the recce then we can adjust that plan.

There might be a certain section which they think is going to get rougher than normal or if they're expecting a lot of rocks to be pulled out, they'll want somebody in there to call back with the information before the second run of the stage.

Between the stages, they walk maybe a kilometre or so in each direction to give us as much information as possible.

How do you physically communicate the information?

SL: We have a WhatsApp group with the crews in and we spread the information that way. This is the quickest and most efficient way of doing it. Obviously, we have the radio in the car as well, but this information can be scanned by the other teams and we don't want to give any of our weather information away. We also have mobile telephones in the car. Once we've agreed location points for the weather crews, they will go out and recce all of their points to make sure they have a mobile phone signal from that location. It's no good if they get there and find they can't send a message or a picture from where they are.

A picture?

SL: Yes, it's true what they say about a picture being worth a 1000 words! If we're talking about things like ruts, we have an agreement between us that the weather crews will take one of the bottles of M-Sport water and put it in the rut. The drivers all know how big those bottles are, so they'll have a very clear picture of what the ruts are like. Having a picture in those circumstances is really valuable.

The rules have changed in terms of communications between the team and the car – how are you allowed to send this weather information?

SL: Communication with the car is forbidden during the stages, we communicate on the road section between the stages. But a lot of this information comes to them when they're in service; obviously the weather data and news of the road condition will play a part in the decision of which tyres to take on a loop of stages.

How's it gone this year?

SL: It's been fantastic. Coming into the team for Monte Carlo and winning straight away with Seb and Julien [Ingrassia, co-driver] was unreal – if a little nerve-wracking. I'm a co-driver and I never thought I would get anything like the buzz I get from co-driving in any other role, but being in the room with Malcolm [Wilson, team principal] and Iain Tullie the co-ordinator and all the other guys when Seb crossed the line and won was just incredible.

I'm guessing it hasn't all been plain sailing though...

SL: In all honesty, we've not had any real issues with the team. M-Sport leads the World Rally Championship because it's the most professional team in the world. Having said that, the last rally in Poland was a bit stressful.

Why?

SL: The weather was changing all the time. The guys out in the stages were absolutely brilliant and helped so much with the ability to look at cloud cover, wind direction and things like that and then translate that into what it would mean for the condition of the road.

Have you always been interested in meteorology?

SL: Not so much, but I can't help myself now. I can't go outside without looking up at the cloud cover. It's a really exciting part of the job and when you get it right it's so, so satisfying and the drivers and co-drivers are so appreciative – I really feel like part of the team.

Do you always get it right?

SL: The record's not bad at the moment. That said, on the night before Rally Poland I was working with the Meteo guy and looking at a satellite picture showing a huge swathe of cloud passing about 14 kilometres *away* from the service park. Five minutes later I was standing outside hanging on to a service tent in the biggest storm I've ever seen in my life!

What's it like working with guys like Sebastien Ogier?

SL: He's a four-time world champion and it's not hard to see why. In fairness, all of the drivers are the same and I know this from when I'm co-driving – drivers want information now and they want only the information absolutely pertinent to what they're doing. For example, on Friday morning, the drivers aren't particularly interested in a storm that might or might not be coming in on Sunday lunchtime. I wouldn't say they're demanding, but it's all about the here and now. A couple of times in Poland, I gave the guys a forecast for the afternoon stages that was 15 minutes old, but Ott asked me to get a forecast more up-to-date – he wanted to know what the forecasters were saying right now, not 15 minutes ago. Nothing is left to chance.

Does this change your ambitions in rallying now? Are you more a co-ordinator than a co-driver?

SL: Not a bit. Working in the World Rally Championship with M-Sport has made me appreciate what it takes to succeed at the very top of the sport and, more than ever now, I want to be there in the car calling the notes. I still absolutely believe I have what it takes to make it to the top of the sport as a co-driver and I won't rest until I'm there.

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Stuart Loudon is a semi-professional co-driver who has started 92 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.

