

The Loudon-clear guide to... **Kennards Hire Rally Australia**

Twelve rallies and 226 stages have brought the FIA World Rally Championship to Coffs Harbour, Australia and the stunning conclusion of arguably *the* most exciting season in the history of the series.

It's winner takes all down under.

And, right to the last, there's a twist: Sébastien Ogier tops the table ahead of the finale, but at what cost? If it's warm and dry, he'll be forced to sweep the loose gravel roads clean, handing an immediate advantage to his nearest title rivals Thierry Neuville and Ott Tänak.

If it is dry, the performance advantage undoubtedly lies with those following the Frenchman, but psychologically, where is Neuville right now? He led the race for five months with back-to-back wins in Portugal and Sardinia, through Finland, Germany and Wales, only to let it slip last time out in Spain.

Having watched a 27-point advantage slide away, and with the line in sight, has Neuville dropped the ball? Or has Ogier peaked too soon?

And what about Tänak? The season's ultimate speedster is, ironically, the outside bet. Starting this week 23 points behind his former M-Sport team-mate Ogier, the Estonian has one chance, one opportunity: he needs to win. Then sit, wait and wonder what his rivals can and will do.

Whatever happens, we're in for a fitting climax to an utterly absorbing and compelling season of world-class rallying.

Kennards Hire Rally Australia in detail

FIA World Rally Championship round 13/13

WRC – WRC2 – WRC3

Date: Thursday November 15 – Sunday November 18

Based: Coffs Harbour

Service: Coffs Harbour

Stages: 24

Competitive distance: 318.64km (198.00 miles)

Liaison distance: 698.43km (434.00 miles)

Total distance: 1017.07km (632.00 miles)

Shortest stage: SS7/8/17/18 Destination NSW 1.27km (0.78 miles)

Longest stage: SS10/14 Welshs Creek 28.83km (17.91 miles)

Currency: Australian dollar

Time difference: GMT +11

Sunrise: 0543

Sunset: 1920

Shakedown

The 5.07km (3.15 miles) shakedown stage is located in Wedding Bells State Forrest, 29.61km (18.39 miles) from the service park in Coffs Harbour. The stage runs from 0800-1330 on Thursday November 15.

Kennards Hire Rally Australia itinerary

Friday November 16

SS1 Orara East 1 8.77km (5.44 miles) 0803

SS2 Coldwater 1 14.12km (8.77 miles) 0843

SS3 Sherwood 1 26.68km (16.57 miles) 0941
Service Coffs Harbour 1056
SS4 Orara East 2 8.77km (5.44 miles) 1232
SS5 Coldwater 2 14.12km (8.77 miles) 1312
SS6 Sherwood 2 26.68km (16.57 miles) 1410
SS7 Destination NSW SSS18 1 1.27km (0.78 miles) 1637
SS8 Destination NSW SSS18 2 1.27km (0.78 miles) 1647
Service Coffs Harbour 1707

Saturday November 17

SS9 Argents Hill Reverse 1 13.13km (8.15 miles) 0708
SS10 Welshs Creek Reverse 1 28.83km (17.91 miles) 0751
SS11 Urunga 1 21.28km (13.22 miles) 0859
SS12 Raleigh 1 1.99km (1.23 miles) 0947
Service Coffs Harbour 1022
SS13 Argents Hill Reverse 2 13.13km (8.15 miles) 1208
SS14 Welshs Creek Reverse 2 28.83km (17.91 miles) 1302
SS15 Urunga 2 21.28km (13.22 miles) 1410
SS16 Raleigh 2 1.99km (1.23 miles) 1458
SS17 Destination NSW SSS18 3 1.27km (0.78 miles) 1637
SS18 Destination NSW SSS18 4 1.27km (0.78 miles) 1647
Service Coffs Harbour 1707

Sunday November 18

SS19 Coramba 1 15.55km (9.66 miles) 0653
SS20 Sapphire 1 19.27km (11.97 miles) 0736
SS21 Wedding Bells 1 18 7.16km (4.44 miles) 0838
Service Coffs Harbour 0933
SS22 Coramba 2 15.55km (9.66 miles) 1101
SS23 Sapphire 2 19.27km (11.97 miles) 1144
SS24 Wedding Bells 2 18 7.16km (4.44 miles) 1318
Finish Coffs Harbour 1515

Running order

1 Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Ford Fiesta WRC)
5 Thierry Neuville/Nicolas Gilsoul (Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC)
8 Ott Tänak/Martin Jarveoja (Toyota Yaris WRC)
9 Esapekka Lappi/Janne Ferm (Toyota Yaris WRC)
7 Jari-Matti Latvala/Miikka Anttila (Toyota Yaris WRC)
4 Andreas Mikkelsen/Anders Jaeger (Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC)
2 Elfyn Evans/Dan Barritt (Ford Fiesta WRC)
11 Craig Breen/Scott Martin (Citroën C3 WRC)
6 Hayden Paddon/Sebastian Marshall (Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC)
3 Teemu Suninen/Mikko Markkula (Ford Fiesta WRC)
10 Mads Østberg/Torstein Eriksen (Citroën C3 WRC)

Leading WRC championship positions

1 Ogier 204pts; Neuville 201; 3 Tänak 181; 4 Lappi 110; 5 Latvala 102; 6 Mikkelsen 84; 7 Dani Sordo 71; 8 Evans 70; 9 Breen 61; 10 Paddon 55, etc

WRC manufacturer championship positions

1 Toyota Gazoo Racing 331pts; 2 Hyundai Shell Mobis WRT 319; 3 M-Sport Ford WRT 306; 4 Citroën Total Abu Dhabi WRT 216

Leading WRC2 runners

31 Pedro Heller/Pablo Olmos (Ford Fiesta R5)
32 Armin Kremer/Pirmin Winklhofer (Škoda Fabia R5)
33 Alberto Heller/José Díaz (Ford Fiesta R5)
34 Gianluca Linari/Pietro Elia Ometto (Subaru Impreza WRX Sti)

Leading WRC2 championship positions

1 Jan Kopecký 143pts; 2 Pontus Tidemand 111; 3 Kalle Rovanperä 90; 4 Gus Greensmith 70; 5 Lukas Pieniazek 56; 6 Fabio Andolfi 54; 6 Ole Christian Veiby 47, etc

Leading WRC3 entries

61 Enrico Brazzoli/Luca Beltrame (Citroën DS3 R3)
62 Louise Cook/Stefan Davis (Citroën DS3 R3)

Leading WRC3 championship positions

1 Brazzoli 98pts; 2 Taisko Lario 97; 3 Emil Bergkvist 86pts; 4 Dennis Rådström 80; 5 Jean-Baptiste Franceschi 79pts; 6 Louise Cook 59, etc

Stuart Loudon's key stage: SS24 Wedding Bells 18 7.16km (4.44 miles)

It's got to be. There's every chance this year's World Rally Championship will be decided in the final metres of the final stage of the final round – and that will make this one a very special stage.

There is, of course, nothing new with the Wedding Bells stage, it's been part of the Australian itinerary for a long time. But the organisers have turned it around for this year, which will mean a new set of pacenotes for all the crews and the hope that familiarity will breed anything but contempt.

It's not a hugely technical stage in either direction, but it is fast... very fast. And it comes with a crowd-pleasing jump and watersplash. A new feature for this year is the decision to put the finish podium ceremony immediately after the stage. Ogier, Neuville or Tänak, whoever takes the title, they won't have long to wait before getting their hands on the champagne.

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

I've been fortunate enough to work with these guys in the last couple of years and it's an absolute privilege to do so. They're the ultimate professionals as well as being the most decent and down-to-earth fellas in the service park.

I know there are probably a good few folk out there who think it's time to have a champion driver who's not French and not called Sébastien, but this isn't that year. Séb and Julien have really pulled this one together in 2018. They've ridden out the highs and the lows; met triumph and disaster and, yes, they've absolutely treated those two impostors just the same.

Which is why, this year more than ever, the names Ogier, Ingrassia and M-Sport should be engraved on the silverware for the 2018 FIA World Rally Championship.

Weather with you

Well, here's the thing... it might rain! All that chatter at the top of this story about Ogier struggling in hot, dry conditions and, you never know: an already fickle New South Wales summer could find in his favour on Friday. Twelve months ago, the woods inland from the Coffs coast were tinder-dry, having been roasted under a scorching early southern hemisphere sun for weeks. Not this time. There's been rain around in the lead-up and showers or heavy rain as well as sunshine are reckoned to be inevitable this week.

Most successful driver on Kennards Hire Rally Australia

Juha Kankkunen (4 wins)

2018 World Rally Championship stats...

Stages planned: 226

Stages run: 227

Longest stage of the season: Vero – Sarrola-Carcopino 55.17km (34.28 miles) Tour de Corse

Shortest stage of the season: Street Stage Leon 1.11km (0.68 miles) Rally Mexico

Longest competitive route of the season: Rallye Monte-Carlo 388.59km (241.46 miles)

Shortest competitive route of the season: Rally Turkey 312.44km (194.15 miles)

WRC fastest times in 2018

1 Tänak 62; 2 Neuville 38; 3 Ogier 36; 4 Latvala 20; 5 Lappi 15; 6 Mikkelsen 13; 7 Sordo 10; 8 Sébastien Loeb 9; 9 Kris Meeke 8; 10 Breen 7, etc

WRC stages led in 2018

1 Tänak 80; 2 Ogier 65; 3 Neuville 35; 4 Mikkelsen 11; 5 Sordo 10; 6 Loeb 7; 7 Latvala 6; 8 Østberg 4; 9 Meeke 3; 10 Paddon/Breen 2, etc.

WRC2 fastest times in 2018

1 Rovannerä 52; 2 Tidemand 47; 3 Kopecky 37; 4 Veiby 17; 5 Takamoto 10; 6 Stéphane Lefebvre/Kajetanowicz 9, etc

WRC2 stages led in 2018

1 Rovannerä 60; 2 Kopecky 56; 3 Tidemand 42; 4 Takamoto 17; 5 Eric Camilli 15; 6 Lefebvre 14, etc.

WRC3 fastest times in 2018

1 Franceschi/Lario 42; 3 Williams 41; 4 Bergkvist 30; 5 Torn 23; 6 Enrico Brazzoli 13, etc

WRC3 stages led in 2018

1 Williams 43; 2 Franceschi 32; 3 Lario 29; 4 Rådström 28; 5 Bergkvist 22; 6 Torn 21, etc.

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Stuart Loudon is a semi-professional co-driver who has started 103 rallies, 21 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.

Stats courtesy of ewrc-results.com