



Tears and cheers as WRGB begins

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Wales Rally
GB began in
dramatic
fashion
yesterday,
*writes Gary
Jones.*



The world's leading rally drivers treated fans to an awe-inspiring display of high-speed thrills and spectacular slides through the legendary north Wales forests and there was something for spectators to celebrate with the coronation of a homegrown British champion on the first full leg of Wales Rally GB.

Following thursday night's short, sharp blast through the Visit Conwy Tir Prince curtain-raiser, the FIA World Rally Championship crews renewed battle with a vengeance friday, tackling eight ultra-demanding speed tests.

From the fast, smooth challenge of Clocaenog to the picture postcard Brenig, the bumps and jumps of Penmachno's 'Cresta Run' and the new fan-friendly, multi-surface Slate Mountain



test high up in Snowdonia, the action was fast-and-frantic right from the outset.

History was made on Brenig and Penmachno as closed British roads were used for the first time in a World Championship motor sport event in the UK, creating fresh challenges for competitors and serving as a precursor to Sunday's eagerly-anticipated, ground-breaking Llandudno Great Orme Street Stage.

The WRC's form man, Toyota's Ott Tänak (*above*), maintained his recent momentum as he set a blistering pace, winning five of the eight stages to hold an advantage just shy of half-a-minute going into today.



The Estonian is chasing a fourth consecutive victory in his bid to close down the gap in the World Championship standings to leader Thierry Neuville. "It's been a very good day," Tănak acknowledged. "The performance has been strong and we look to be in a good position, but there's still a long way to go so it's vital that we stay focussed.

"I think everybody likes tomorrow's stages; they're real rallying classics - very fast and flowing and they should suit the Toyota well. I'm looking forward to the fight."

Belgium's Neuville is embroiled in a fierce squabble for the runner-up spoils, with less than ten seconds blanketing his Hyundai, the Toyotas of Jari-Matti Latvala and Esapekka Lappi and the Ford of defending World Champion Sébastien Ogier - setting the scene for a no-holds-barred Saturday scrap.

Local hero Elfyn Evans should have been part of that battle. The Welshman - who hails from nearby Dolgellau - was running an excellent second, within ten seconds of Tănak when the engine in his Ford Fiesta picked up a misfire on a road section, forcing him out of contention.

"Things were looking pretty good," reflected Evans. "We were keeping Ott [Tănak] honest - never more than a few seconds adrift of the lead in challenging conditions - and we were looking forward to keeping the pressure on this afternoon but unfortunately we never got that chance."



The Welsh pairing of Matt Edwards and co-driver Darren Garrod clinched the Prestone MSA British Rally Championship title on home soil on Wales Rally GB in their M-Sport Ford Fiesta R5 after a stellar season in Britain's premier rallying series.

Despite sealing the honours, Pirelli-supported Edwards couldn't keep up his 100 per-cent win record as a puncture on the penultimate stage slipped him down the order, but a vital top four place finish on the opening round of the weekend gave him enough points to secure his first BRC title.

The penultimate round of the Prestone MSA British Rally Championship was played out on the Thursday and Friday stages of Dayinsure Wales Rally GB with nine tough and demanding stages providing the first gauntlet for the weekend.

Matt Edwards said, "It's how the box-set will look with my picture on the front cover! That's all I've been bothered about! It's amazing.

"Huge credit to everybody who's been behind us over the last three years and obviously Swift Group and Pete Smith have done an amazing job for us getting everybody behind us."

There was better news for home fans as Llandudno-based Matt Edwards popularly clinched the Prestone MSA British Rally Championship crown. Now the pressure is off his back, the



Welshman will go out all guns blazing in an effort to sign off the season in style with a fourth triumph of 2018 in the weekend's concluding round.

Just outside of the top ten, a trio of hard-charging Brits fill positions 12th to 14th overall, with Gus Greensmith sitting third in the supporting WRC2 class, ahead of rapid privateer Tom Cave and former British Champion David Bogie, who won the first of the weekend's two BRC rounds in his Skoda Fabia.

Today, the action moves to mid Wales and some of the most classic speed tests on the WRC calendar for the gruelling 'Super Saturday' schedule, with the likes of Myherin, Sweet Lamb, Hafren, Dyfi and Gartheiniog sure to shake up the order and spring a surprise or two.

Sunday morning sees two forest tests in scenic Snowdonia, before the thrilling finale on the streets of Llandudno. In Visit Wales' 'Year of the Sea', crews will race around the iconic Great Orme and then onto the closed streets of Llandudno. The flying finish will be on the resort's famous seafront, before the winners are crowned on the Promenade.

Wales Rally GB after 9 of 23 Special Stages

1. Ott Tänak/Martin Järveoja - Toyota Yaris WRC 1h06m04.3s
2. Thierry Neuville/Nicolas Gilsoul - Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC +28.8s
3. Jari-Matti Latvala/Miikka Anttila - Toyota Yaris WRC +31.3s
4. Esapekka Lappi/Janne Ferm - Toyota Yaris WRC +35.9s
5. Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia - Ford Fiesta WRC +38.2s
6. Craig Breen/Scott Martin - Citroën C3 WRC +48.8s
7. Hayden Paddon/Sebastian Marshall - Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC +1m06.4s



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8. Mads Østberg/Torstein Eriksen - Citroën C3 WRC +1m08.4s

9. Andreas Mikkelsen/Anders Jaeger - Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC +1m24.3s

10. Kalle Rovanperä/ Jonne Halttunen - Skoda Fabia R5 +3m08.4s

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