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Thierry Neuville: “It is going to be a particularly exciting rally”

- The Belgian, third in the WRC, looks forward to the asphalt roads on the Central European Rally
- Perfect pace notes and optimal set-up are essential
- Neuville hoping for plenty of support in the crowd

Belgium’s Thierry Neuville and co-driver Martijn Wydaeghe in the Hyundai i20 Rally1 Hybrid are the biggest threat to the two Toyota drivers Kalle Rovanperä and Elvyn Evans in the title race in the World Rally Championship. Although the man currently third in the table is fully focused on preparations for the coming WRC event in Chile, he is also already looking ahead to the Central European Rally from 26 to 29 October. Neuville will presumably feel right at home at the new WRC rally, which forms the penultimate round of the season. The 35-year-old comes from Sankt Vith in the German-speaking part of Belgium, meaning he can at least make himself understood in the local language in Germany and Austria.

Just four weeks until the new “Central European Rally”. What do you know about this new round of the World Rally Championship?

Thierry Neuville: “To be honest, not an awful lot. Okay, I know that the start is in Prague, we tackle the Czech stages first on the way to Bavaria and the rally centre in Passau, and that we are in Austria and Germany on the Saturday and Sunday. At the moment, we are still concentrating fully on the upcoming Rally Chile, the final gravel race of the season, before we shift our focus to the final two asphalt rallies. However, I can reveal that I have checked out one or two videos of the CER, just out of curiosity. The actual preparations begin, for me at least, after Chile – so, at the start of October.”

Do you have any experience of rallying in the area bordering Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic?

Thierry Neuville: “I have never driven in Bavaria. In the Czech Republic, I drove in the Barum Rally in the IRC. And I have driven in Austria once – in a Ford Fiesta ST in the Waldviertel region in 2008, as part of the Pirelli Star Driver programme. That is not going to be much help to me.” (laughs)

You grew up just a few kilometres from the Rally Germany in the area of Belgium that borders Germany. Is the CER now your new home rally?

Thierry Neuville: “No. Just because I speak German does not mean that I can call it my home rally. Plus, I grew up too far away and in Belgium. It is rather different when, for example, Sébastien Ogier grew up in Gap and the Rally Monte Carlo is in town, so he knows the roads from living there. That is not the case with me and the routes in the tri-border region. However, I am quite certain that many of my fans will travel to the rally to cheer us on. After all, it is the closest round of the WRC to my home.



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Furthermore, it is possible that Hyundai Motorsport GmbH, which is based in the town of Alzenau in Franconia, will invite their workforce, as they did to the Rally Germany. Many of them are not at the rallies and are only able to follow them on the television. They only know from word of mouth how much effort goes into it and how important their work is to us. That would obviously be great, as it not only motivates them, but also us.”

You are a self-confessed fan of asphalt rallies. What is so special about driving on a solid surface?

Thierry Neuville: “It is just great fun. I like the special challenge. Many things are more extreme on asphalt – the acceleration, braking, and last but not least the cornering speeds. You have to drive very precisely. If you lose the line a little on gravel, or end up with a wheel in the ditch, that is not so bad. In contrast, you immediately have a big problem on asphalt roads. You quite simply have less room for error. That makes it much more difficult, but also more appealing to me.”

The last WRC event on asphalt routes was the Rally Croatia in the spring. Have there been any new developments to the Hyundai i20 Rally1 Hybrid?

Thierry Neuville: “A car is forever changing prior to and during the season. I know that the team has tested a few things, but have no idea yet whether anything will be ready before the end of the season or only in 2024, as I was not behind the wheel for the asphalt development drives.”

How are the team and you preparing for the CER?

Thierry Neuville: “Last weekend, Teemu (team-mate Suninen) and I drove a rally in Austria, as he has only contested two gravel rallies in our car so far. As it stands today – and I don’t think much will change, due to the lack of time – we will not start in any other test rallies. That means, as is usually the case, I will have to make do with one day of testing before the CER. I think and hope that this will be in the Czech Republic. Of the three countries, the asphalt roads there are the most unique. Those in Bavaria and Austria ought to be more like the ones in Croatia – some selective, some narrow, some long, some dirty, and so on. The Czech routes are far more bumpy, usually have a lot of different surfaces, and are a real hotchpotch in some places. You not only need perfect pace notes there, but also the optimal set-up, in order to have good grip.”

How high do you rate your chances of winning?

Thierry Neuville: “It goes without saying that my goal is to win. After all, I am a racing driver, so you have to fancy me, particularly at asphalt rallies. However, there are a few others who will have a say at the very front. That is what makes the World Rally Championship so great and so exciting. We know the usual suspects: it would surprise me if Ogier, Roanperä, Evans and Tänak were not battling with us for victory. And you should also keep an eye out for my Hyundai team-mates. “EP” [Esapekka Lappi] and Teemu [Suninen] are really fast on asphalt. They could definitely cause an upset if we get everything together.”



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What weather would you like for the rally?

Thierry Neuville: “If it was up to me, sunshine and clean roads. However, we have no influence on that. Unfortunately, at this time of year, anything is possible. With asphalt rallies, the weather is a really decisive factor. The Rally Germany used to be really tricky in terms of tyre selection. I believe it will be a similar story at the end of October. That adds extra tension for the fans, but also for us. I like it, somehow. However, if you gamble, it can turn your rally upside down. That is the World Rally Championship for you. You can be out in front for two days and pick up a tenth of a second or even a whole second all over the place, and then – boom – it is all wiped out in an instant. What makes the CER special is that the world championship is as good as decided, so virtually everyone will be going all out for the win. As a result, there could be some very interesting decisions, particularly when it comes to tyre selection. There is no question about it, this is going to be a particularly exciting rally – particularly because nobody has any experience of it yet. Fans should definitely not miss it!”

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