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11.10.2023

68 teams start the Central European Rally in the World Rally Championship

- **World rallying elite, including eight-time champion Sébastien Ogier, start at the new event in the border triangle of Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic**
- **Titles on the line in WRC drivers' classification and WRC2 category**
- **All information on the highlights of the entry list at www.centraleuropeanrally.eu**

The entry list for the Central European Rally (October 26-29, 2023) offers plenty of dynamite. The new round of the World Rally Championship in Central Europe will feature 68 teams. The world's elite rally drivers will be battling it out in the tri-border region of Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic, as they jostle for position in the Drivers' World Championship. However, other titles are also up for grabs. It is therefore likely to be an extremely exciting affair when the 68 teams start the 18 special stages. The factory teams from Toyota, Hyundai and Ford (M-Sport) are leading the way and will decide the overall victory at the twelfth round of the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) among themselves. The WRC2 category will make up the bulk of the field with 32 participants. The crews come from 23 nations, with co-hosts Germany and the Czech Republic providing the largest contingents. Teams from Japan, Paraguay and Taiwan have the longest journey to the WRC round between Prague and Passau.

Toyota Gazoo Racing, already confirmed as champions elect in this year's Manufacturer Championship since the recent Rally Chile, lines up with defending champion Kalle Rovanperä and his co-driver Jonne Halttunen (both Finland), Elfyn Evans/Scott Martin from Great Britain, and the Japanese-Irish duo of Takamoto Katsuta and Aaron Johnston. A fourth Toyota GR Yaris will be driven by eight-time world champion Sébastien Ogier, for whom fellow Frenchman Vincent Landais will be reading the pace notes.

The Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team fields three Hyundai i20 Rally1 for the pairings of Thierry Neuville/Martijn Wydaeghe from Belgium, and Finns Esapekka Lappi/Janne Ferm and Teemu Suninen/Mikko Markkula. The M-Sport Ford World Rally Team will also run three Ford Puma Rally1 for Estonians Ott Tänak/Martin Järveoja, as well as Pierre-Louis Loubet/Nicola Gilsoul (France/Belgium) and Grégoire Munster/Louis Louka (Luxemburg/Belgium).

All the works teams' cars (class RC1) have a cutting-edge hybrid drivetrain. This combines a 1.6-litre turbo petrol engine (roughly 380 hp) with an electric motor, which can briefly provide an additional 135 hp or can be used independently whilst travelling through towns and villages. The all-wheel drive system and sequential, six-speed gearbox work mechanically, while electronic driver assistance systems are banned.

Internal battle for the title at Toyota

The two Toyota works drivers Kalle Rovanperä and Elfyn Evans are battling it out for the title in the Driver Championship. Rovanperä, who last year became the youngest world champion ever at just 22



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years of age, currently holds a 31-point lead at the top of the table with two rallies remaining. With a maximum 30 points up for grabs at each WRC round, the Finn is guaranteed to at least lead the championship going into the season finale in Japan (16th to 19th November 2023). However, he can also wrap up his second title as soon as the Central European Rally.

“I like new rallies and new challenges. Given my lead in the table, I can afford to take a few more risks and go for the win at the Central European Rally. That obviously suits me. A thorough route inspection is the basis for success. I am really intrigued to see what awaits us,” says Rovaniemi, looking ahead to the new event. Team-mate Evans is counting on his quality on asphalt. “The fact that we won the most recent asphalt rally in Croatia means we have to be one to look out for,” says the Welshman optimistically. “I find the three-country concept exciting. I am hoping for a good mix of narrow, winding and fast routes.”

Top Hyundai driver Thierry Neuville still has a mathematical chance of finishing runner-up, as does Ford driver Ott Tänak, who claimed his second victory of the season last time out in Chile. “What makes the Central European Rally so special is the fact that the World Championship is as good as decided, so virtually all the works drivers will be going for the win. Depending on the weather, there could be some very interesting decisions when it comes to tyre selection. “No question: it is going to be a really exciting rally,” says Neuville. “In principle, I think it is good not to always have the same rallies and routes on the calendar,” says Tänak, who welcomes the addition of the new event in Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic to the WRC.

Higher mathematics in WRC2

The title race is still open in the WRC2 class. Production-based cars with 1.6-litre turbo engines (roughly 295 hp) and mechanical all-wheel drive are used in this second division of the World Rally Championship. All the title contenders have signed up to race at the Central European Rally. The championship leader is Norway’s Andreas Mikkelsen, who lines up in a Škoda for the Toksport WRT team, which is based near the Nürburgring. The threat to the Norwegian could come from his British team-mate at Toksport, Gus Greensmith, and French Citroën driver Yohan Rossel from the PH Sport team.

Mikkelsen could be crowned WRC2 champion for the second time with one round still to come at the Central European Rally. A glance at the table provides insufficient information. In WRC2, only the best six results from a maximum seven rallies count towards the overall standings. Mikkelsen has established his slender lead over Rossel (four points) and Greensmith (nine points) over the course of just five rallies. His two rivals, meanwhile, have each contested six rounds of the World Rally Championship already. This means that Mikkelsen is the only member of this trio who could, if necessary, still pick up points at the finale in Japan.

The top WRC2 drivers also include newly-crowned Austrian national champion Simon Wagner (Škoda), local Czech favourite Erik Cais (Škoda), Finns Emil Lindholm (Hyundai) and Sami Pajari (Škoda), Poland’s Kajetan Kajetanowicz and Miko Marczyk (both Škoda), Adrien Fourmaux (Ford) and Nicolas Ciamin (Škoda) from France, and Nikolay Gryazin (Škoda), who starts under a neutral flag.



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Gryazin and Kajetanowicz also have their sights set on the title in the sub-category WRC2 Challenge, which is currently led by Pajari. In the Team competition in WRC2, the title will most likely be decided between Toksport (Škoda) and M-Sport Ford.

Armin Kremer has sights set on the title in the WRC Masters Cup

Among those flying the flag for Germany at the Central European Rally will be former European rally champion Armin Kremer. With daughter Ella in the co-driver seat, the businessman from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern lines up in a Škoda run by the Baumschlager Rallye+Racing team, and has his sights set on the title in the WRC Masters Cup, which is reserved for drivers over the age of 50. “I did once win the Rallye Šumava in the Czech Republic about twenty years ago. However, the Central European Rally is completely new to me. That is what makes it so appealing. A class win would put me right back in the title race in the WRC Masters Cup,” says the ambitious Kremer. Austrian Johannes Keferböck (Škoda) also has a mathematical chance of winning this title. Championship leader Alexander Villanueva (Škoda) from Spain does not start this rally.

Brand diversity in the lower classes

The rest of the field is made up of teams running cars from the RC3 (roughly 260 hp, all-wheel drive) and RC4 (roughly 215 hp, front-wheel drive) classes, as well as sports cars from the RGT class. These range from the Porsche 911 GT3 , Alpine A110 and Abarth 124 Rally to the Renault Clio, Ford Fiesta, Peugeot 208 and Opel Corsa. Joining the WRC field are roughly a dozen competitors from the ADAC Opel Electric Rally Cup. The one-make cup will contest its season finale on selected special stages at the Central European Rally. The full entry list is available on the official homepage: www.centraleuropeanrally.eu.

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