

**DAY REPORT: 2012 Intercontinental Rally Challenge, round nine of 13**  
**Barum Czech Rally Zlín**  
**Day one, Saturday 1 September**

**HANNINEN TOPS BATTLE OF THE IRC GREATS IN ZLIN**

Juho Hänninen heads the battle of the Intercontinental Rally Challenge greats on Barum Czech Rally Zlín following a day of high drama on the demanding all-asphalt stages in south-east Czech Republic, four of which were broadcast live on Eurosport and free-to-air Czech TV.

Finn Hänninen, IRC title-winner in 2010, leads three-time runner-up Jan Kopecký by 11.4s with defending IRC champion Andreas Mikkelsen 18.0s behind the Czech hero heading into Sunday's six special stages. With the ŠKODA Fabia Super 2000-driving trio winning a total of 21 IRC events between them, the final-day chase for IRC glory is set to thrill, particularly if rain once again forms the backdrop to the high-speed action.

Hänninen, chasing his first victory in Czech Republic, began Saturday's eight tests trailing surprise overnight leader Tomáš Kostka by 6.4s. He moved in front by winning the day's opening run following an inspired decision to opt for slick tyres for the drying stage when most of his rivals went for intermediate or rain tyres believing the conditions would be worse. However, his choice of a less soft tyre for the rain-hit second loop left him without vital grip on occasion and he began to slip back, only to retake top spot when Mikkelsen struggled on the first run Tesák stage, which would also prove his nemesis when it brought the day's action to a close this evening.

The ŠKODA UK Motorsport ace, fastest on three stages during the course of the day, reported marker poles visible during reconnaissance were no longer present, which he said had made his pacenotes less effective. With his confidence waning for the second run, the 23-year-old Norwegian slipped almost half a minute off the lead heading to the overnight halt in Otrokovice.

"It was such a difficult stage and I didn't have any confidence in my pacenotes," said Mikkelsen. "It was the last slippery part on really shiny Tarmac where I didn't go fast enough. Maybe I needed to push harder but then there's a big risk to go off. We've dropped back but there's still a long way to go."

Hänninen also reported problems of his own in Tesák, particularly on the first run through: "It was like driving on ice with slick tyres and I don't understand how I stayed on the road. Luckily we are here and leading and the car is in good shape but anything can happen yet."

By completing Saturday's stages, Jan Kopecký has won his second Czech championship, which is running in tandem with the main IRC event. "This was my target and now I will speak to the team if I can have a big fight tomorrow with the other drivers," he said.

Although he gradually lost touch with the leaders, Tomáš Kostka – a frontrunner in the Czech touring car and ralliesprint championships – excelled and rounded out an impressive day by going third fastest on Saturday's final test in his privateer Fabia. The Zlín resident said the performance had exceeded his

expectations. Roman Kresta, meanwhile, is fifth with Robert Barrable a strong sixth following a high-speed spin on stage seven from which the Irishman admitted he was lucky to emerge unscathed.

Estonian Karl Kruuda is seventh with Jaromír Tarabus eighth following earlier powersteering woes. Austria's Andreas Aigner is the leading IRC Production Cup runner in a fine ninth overall in his Subaru Impreza R4 STI with Michał Sołowow, from Poland, completing the top 10 in his Peugeot 207 S2000.

Aigner moved to the top of the IRC Production Cup division when last year's winner Jaroslav Orsák took a more cautious approach through the mud-coated sections of the second Pindula stage. And the Stohl Racing ace pulled clear when Orsák punctured on stage nine. Despite being saddled with a 60-second time penalty, Jarkko Nikara shone by closing to within 10 seconds of Aigner in his Tommi Mäkinen Racing Subaru. But a crash on stage seven led to the Finn's retirement after he'd gone third fastest outright on stage five. Japan's Toshi Arai is second in the category starting day two.

Sepp Wiegand is 11<sup>th</sup> overnight following a huge moment on stage seven when his ŠKODA Auto Deutschland Fabia slid sideways under braking for a corner, struck a tree backwards and ended up in a ditch. The 21-year-old was delayed by more than 1m20s in what was the first accident of his career.

After an alternator glitch slowed him through the Zlín superspecial, Petter Solberg Engineering's Patrik Flodin was hampered by an engine misfire for large chunks of the day, which the Swede reckoned had delayed him by more than one minute. He's currently 15<sup>th</sup> in his M-Sport Ford Fiesta S2000 after stopping to change a puncture on stage nine. Pavel Valoušek retired before stage two as a result of engine damage sustained when his Peugeot lost oil pressure on SSS Zlín.

Robert Consani heads the IRC 2WD Cup battle in his Renault Mégane RS after a rapid showing. Czech youngster Jan Černý is second but there was frustration for Honda Civic Type R driver Martin Kangur who crashed out on stage four having suffered a puncture on stage three.

Sunday's action consists of six stages and begins with the 21.40-kilometre Halenkovice test at 08:57hrs local time. The finish is scheduled for 14:30hrs in Zlín. Both runs of the famous Maják stage will be shown live on Eurosport and free-to-air Czech TV.

## ENDS

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