



Saturday wrap: Loeb on course for glory

Sebastien Loeb is six stages and 61.54 timed kilometres away from winning the FIA World Rally Championship for a ninth time after he completed day two of Rallye de France Alsace with a lead of almost half a minute.

Citroen pilot Loeb, who was born close to the event base in Strasbourg, began day two in a close battle with Ford driver Jari-Matti Latvala. However, when Latvala slid into a ditch on the day's second stage and dropped some 20s, the path was clear for Loeb to extend his overall advantage, which stands at 29.7s at the overnight halt.

"Today has been good with no problems," said Loeb. "I have felt pressure all day but I didn't take any risk as I don't need to win to be world champion. There could be rain and tricky weather tomorrow so it could be a great day for Citroen but it could also be a difficult final day."

Latvala, meanwhile, hit back with three stage wins but admitted he needs to find more consistency in order to close the gap to leader Loeb. "My speed was good again today, although I'm disappointed I made a mistake this morning," said the Finn. "Tomorrow's stages are short so it will be difficult to attack. But I'm thinking more about preserving second than trying to win, which will be almost impossible unless Loeb makes a mistake. My car is fast enough to win the rally, but it's the driver that has to improve."

Mikko Hirvonen, in the second factory Citroen and the only driver capable of preventing Loeb from claiming the world title, is third overnight, 24.3s behind Latvala having suffered from a heavy cold throughout the day.

Petter Solberg had high hopes of overhauling Hirvonen for third place starting day two only to crash out in spectacular fashion when he felled a telegraph pole as he battled to regain control after going off the road on a fast left-hand bend. Like Nasser Al-Attiyah, who retired on stage 10, he is due to restart under Rally 2 rules on Sunday.

Mads Ostberg demoted Prodrive MINI runner Dani Sordo for fourth with an impressive display in his Adapta Fiesta. However, both will be under threat from Thierry Neuville who slipped to sixth after he was handed a 20-second time penalty for an early check-in at the start of stage 11.

M-Sport Fiesta youngsters Ott Tanak and Evgeny Novikov are seventh and eighth respectively with Chris Atkinson ninth for WRC Team MINI Portugal alongside stand-in co-driver Glenn Macneall. Czech Martin Prokop completes the top 10 after enduring a high-speed spin in the afternoon.

Sebastien Ogier is 11th for Volkswagen Motorsport. The French ace, last year's winner, had been in a close fight with team-mate Andreas Mikkelsen but pulled clear when the Norwegian's similar Skoda Fabia Super 2000 dropped onto three cylinders.



Circuit racers Yvan Muller and Romain Dumas are 15th and 17th respectively in their MINIs. Brazil World Rally Team's Daniel Oliveira is 21st with countryman Paulo Nobre 24th despite encountering a gearshift issue.

Sunday's action begins with the 17.08-kilometre Vignoble de Cleebourg stage at 09:23hrs local time.