

Thrill ride

Michael Stoneman looks ahead to the 2015 edition of the world's most challenging motorsport series, the FIA World Rally championship

From the Alpine passes of the historic Rally Monte Carlo and the snow-packed forest tracks of Sweden, to the scenic hills of Sardinia and the unpredictable weather of the Welsh countryside, the World Rally Championship (WRC) provides a motor racing challenge like no other.

First established in 1973, the WRC pits drivers and their production-based cars against some of the wildest conditions in motorsport to create what is widely regarded as the most challenging

championship in the world. For the last two years, the man to beat has been Volkswagen's Sébastien Ogier, who enjoyed a dominant 2013 campaign alongside co-driver Julien Ingrassia – winning nine out of the 13 races to clinch the title by the largest-ever points margin in the WRC's history – before successfully defending his crown in 2014 after a hard-fought battle with Volkswagen team-mate Jari-Matti Latvala and his co-driver Miikka Anttila.

The two Polo R WRC crews



Pictured: Spain (top) and Argentina see drivers contend with narrow, rock-laden tracks at furious high speeds

won 12 of the 13 rallies between them, with eight one-two finishes, which resulted in a highly-entertaining duel until Ogier and Ingrassia clinched the title with a faultless performance in the penultimate round in Spain.

"It was a fantastic feeling to win the title again. But more than that, I'm happy that Julien and I have confirmed the first title from last year," says Ogier. "It's a big achievement to reach the goal to

become a world champion, but to confirm it is even better. Also because this one was definitely harder to get as we were in a close fight with Jari-Matti Latvala until the end. I think it's made the championship more exciting for the fans and it's made my victories tastier, let's say, when you have to work hard and you're able to win this kind of battle."

With Andreas Mikkelsen finishing third in the 2014 ▶





WRC 2015 RACE CALENDAR	
22-25 Jan	Monte Carlo
12-15 Feb	Sweden
05-08 Mar	Mexico
23-26 Apr	Argentina
21-24 May	Portugal
11-14 Jun	Sardinia
02-05 Jul	Poland
30 Jul-02 Aug	Finland
20-23 Aug	Germany
10-13 Sep	Australia
01-04 Oct	France
22-25 Oct	Spain
12-15 Nov	Great Britain

championship behind Ogier and Latvala, Volkswagen became only the second manufacturer in WRC history to secure the top three spots in the drivers' classification, equalling Lancia's efforts in 1987 and 1988.

Following the German team's level of consistency since entering the WRC in 2013 – which has included 345 victories from 486 stages, 41 podiums from 74 starts and 22 wins from 26 rallies – it will be hard to look past Ogier and Latvala when the 2015 season kicks off in Monte Carlo in January.

Team director Jost Capito is adamant, however, that his drivers will face competition for the title.

"In 2014, we successfully overcame the major challenge of defending the World Championship title with an indescribable team spirit. We put together the longest winning run in the history of the World Rally Championship and won more rounds than any manufacturer before us. But his will not make it any easier for us to challenge for the title again next year," he says. "We will once again be up against strong opposition. It will be almost impossible to surpass the awesome 2014 season, which yielded 12 wins from a possible 13 and first, second and

third in the Drivers' Championship. However, that is precisely what we will be aiming to do."

Adding intrigue to the curtain-raiser in Monte Carlo will be the return of legendary nine-time WRC champion Sébastien Loeb, who will make a one-off appearance in the Citroën DS3 WRC.

Frenchman Loeb, who retired from full-time rallying in 2012 to compete in the World Touring Car Championship (WTCC), is already looking forward to resuming his record-breaking partnership with co-driver Daniel Elena.

"I didn't hesitate for a second when I was offered the chance to compete at the opening round of the 2015 World Rally Championship in the DS 3 WRC," says the 40-year-old. "I think Daniel and I



Above: Watch as drivers battle the elements in Sweden

Below: Legendary nine-time champion Sébastien Loeb will return for 2015 (left); Sébastien Ogier has been the man to beat for the last two years (right)

would agree that Monte-Carlo is one of our favourite events. The beautiful roads, the fact of having to gamble when it comes to tyre choice and the party atmosphere that you get on the stages: we can't wait to experience it all again."

From Monte Carlo, drivers will move on to Sweden and Mexico before tackling the narrow, rocky tracks of Argentina's Sierras Chicas mountains, with the rally moving to the end of April when conditions are likely to be warmer and drier.



The schedule change also sees the Portuguese round move back to late May, with the race returning to its traditional fan-base in the north after 10 years in the southern Algarve region.

The Polish leg, which successfully returned to the championship in 2014 after a five-year absence, also retains its place for next season, with drivers set to race through 15 countries across 13 rallies during the campaign.

"The breadth of events geographically ensures a truly global championship," explains WRC Promoter's managing director, Oliver Ciesla. "We've again blended a mix of classic events that date back to the championship's origins with newer, but firmly established, rallies. All will offer a challenging variety of roads and conditions to ensure that WRC will provide the ultimate all-round test of driving ability."

With its mad mix of high speeds, unforgiving surfaces and extreme conditions, the WRC looks set to be the greatest adventure in motorsport once again in 2015. ■

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