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ISSUE 303/CONTENTS

- 01/ Cover
- 02/ ATS
- 03/ Editorial Information
- 04/ Opening Shot
- 05/ Skoda's R5 commitment
- 07/ Robert Kubica and M-Sport join
- 08/ Hirvonen and Evans sign for M-Sport
- 10/ Closing Shot

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OPENING SHOT

The Dakar Rally is nearly upon us, and it is not only a race across the South American deserts for bikes and vehicles, but also for these massive trucks!
Photograph by Quickpic



SKODA CONFIRMS DEVELOPMENT OF FABIA R5

Skoda has announced that the Fabia S2000 – one of the most successful rally cars of the S2000 era – will be succeeded by an all-new model, the Fabia R5. An intense development programme will begin at Skoda Motorsport's Mlada Boleslav base in early 2014, ahead of a competition debut in 2015.

Words by H&H / Photography by ERC Media



Confirming the Fabia R5 programme, Michal Michal Hrabánek, Skoda Motorsport Director, said: "The new R5 rally car will be equipped with a 1.6-litre turbo engine, in accordance with FIA regulations. That's a big change compared to today's naturally-aspirated, two-litre petrol engines. The R5 category succeeds the previous Super 2000 class. This way, we are able to continue to compete successfully in international championships and to push ahead with our customer programme. Entering the R5 class is a logical step for Skoda. As it stands, we are assuming that the new car will be homologated by mid-2015."

The announcement follows another remarkable season for both Skoda Motorsport and the Fabia S2000. With overall victories in three international and six national championships, Skoda has enjoyed one of the most successful seasons in its 112-year motorsport history.

In addition to developing the Fabia R5, Skoda will continue to campaign the current Fabia S2000 in 2014. The brand will enter cars on selected rounds of both the FIA Asia-Pacific Rally Championship (APRC) and the FIA European Rally Championship (ERC). Current ERC Champions Jan Kopecký and Pavel Dresler will tackle the APRC, while rising star Esapekka Lappi will line up in the ERC with co-driver Janne Ferm. In addition, the German pairing of Sepp Wiegand/Frank Christian (Skoda AUTO Deutschland), will also contest rounds of the ERC in a factory-prepared Fabia S2000.

Fabia S2000 – the most successful rally car in Skoda history:

- First shown at the 2007 Geneva Motor Show, the Fabia S2000 has become the most successful rally car in Skoda's 112-year motorsport history. Having recorded 27 Intercontinental Rally Challenge (IRC) event victories and three overall driver and manufacturer titles, the Fabia S2000 has won more IRC events than any other car. Andreas Mikkelsen became the first back-to-back champion driving for Skoda UK Motorsport in 2011 and 2012.

- Building on these triumphs, factory driver Jan Kopecký took the 2013 European Rally Championship (ERC) title with a commanding season-long performance.

- Further afield, the Fabia S2000 has also recored series victories in both the Super 2000 World Championship (SWRC) with Juho Hänninen and the Asia Pacific Rally Championship (APRC) with Chris Atkinson and Gaurev Gill.

- Paraguayan Gustavo Saba won both the FIA Codaşur South American Rally Championship and the Paraguayan Championship in 2013, with Skoda drivers accumulating a further five national titles in Austria (Raimund Baumschlager), Italy (Umberto Scandola), Bulgaria (Dimitar Iliev), Jordan (Marouf Abu Samra) and Portugal (Ricardo Moura).



NEW CHALLENGE FOR POLE ROBERT KUBICA

Robert Kubica and his long-term partner, Lotos, are delighted to announce their plans for the 2014 FIA World Rally Championship (WRC). The Pole will contest all 13 rounds of next season's championship with a Lotos-supported Ford Fiesta RS WRC.

Words by H&H / Photography by H&H Archive

Following some inspiring performances in 2013, M-Sport were eager to see Kubica progress his career within the team. The Pole's dominant display in this year's WRC 2 series saw him burst onto the world stage in style, and M-Sport will provide him with a great platform from which to advance his career at the sport's highest level. Having won five of his seven WRC 2 events this year, there is no doubting Kubica's speed and skill behind the wheel of a rally car, but it is the WRC 2 Champion's ambition and determination which makes him an ideal candidate for the M-Sport squad.

Having made his WRC world rally car debut at the season-closing round in Wales last month, Kubica is keen to develop and build on his experience at rallying's highest league. Contesting all 13 rounds of next season's championship, there will be a number of new experiences for the 29-year-old including the specialist stages of Sweden's snow-covered countryside and the high-altitudes and soaring temperatures of the Americas.

Of course, there are few drivers who possess the former Formula One driver's desire to succeed, and armed with the Fiesta RS WRC, the WRC community should prepare for the coming of Kubica.

Robert Kubica said: "I am really glad that I will participate in all 13 rounds of the [FIA] World Rally Championship [WRC] with the [Ford] Fiesta RS WRC. The support of my partner, LOTOS Group, combined with the knowledge and experience of M-Sport will create a solid foundation for my further development and I am looking forward to gathering valuable experience on the WRC stages."



M-SPORT LINES UP HIRVONEN AND EVANS FOR 2014'S WRC SEASON

M-Sport will field a mix of youth and experience in the 2014 FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) as the winning potential of Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen are combined with the raw talent and ambition of Elfyn Evans and Daniel Barritt. Both crews will take to the Cumbrian firm's Ford Fiesta RS WRC for all 13 rounds of next season's championship.

Words by H&H / Photography by WorldRallyPics



The news that Hirvonen is coming home will bring a smile to the face of many a rally fan. Having started his WRC career with the Ford/M-Sport operation in 2003, the Finn enjoyed eight years behind the wheel of M-Sport machinery and was instrumental in securing Ford's back-to-back manufacturers' titles in 2006 and 2007. With fourteen of his fifteen victories claimed with M-Sport's range of award-winning rally cars, Hirvonen's return also provides the team with a real contender for rally wins.

Occupying the seat of the sister M-Sport Fiesta RS WRC, is one of rallying's most promising up-and-coming young talents. Evans' breakthrough performance in 2013 saw him elevated to the top of WRC competition. The Welshman showcased some impressive pace in the WRC 2 category, but it was arguably his performance at Rally Italia Sardegna which saw him stamp his authority on the world stage. A world rally car debut is no mean feat, but when combined with unknown stages, an unfamiliar co-driver and a mere two days of preparation, the youngster's sixth place finish was a revelation which saw him join an elite group of 'rookies' to have impressed to such an extent on their World Rally Car debut.

Working closely with the team, Evans and Barritt will be given the opportunity to learn from their team-mates' expertise whilst refining their own pace and experience ahead of a prospective long-term campaign with the Cumbrian firm.

The youngster started his career with the Ford/M-Sport partnership in 2007, winning the Ford Fiesta Sport Trophy series in both the UK and Ireland. Progressing from the Ford Fiesta ST to the globally successful Ford Fiesta R2, it was not long before he was a regular on the WRC stage – winning the 2012 FIA WRC Academy Cup with a dominant display on both gravel and asphalt. The WRC 2 category swiftly followed with some inspired performances behind the wheel of the Ford Fiesta R5, and in 2014, the Welshman will complete his ladder of success by lining-up for a full season in M-Sport's top-specification Fiesta.

Mikko Hirvonen said: "To be back in a Ford Fiesta RS WRC, it really feels as though I am coming home. The last two years were really good for myself and Jarmo [Lehtinen, co-driver], but although we will take a lot of good memories with us, we didn't necessarily achieve what we set out to do. Joining M-Sport will give us a good chance to try again – a fresh start in a car we know we can be competitive in. We are motivated to win, and we are in the best possible place to do that.

Elfyn Evans said: "It is an absolutely fantastic feeling to know that I will be driving a World Rally Car for a full season next year! Last year was a real development year for us, so it is great to be able to take the next step in my career and for myself and Dan [Barritt, co-driver] to really progress within the team. The great thing about this programme is that it gives us time. The whole team is behind us and we have a long-term plan to get to where we all, ultimately, want to be. This is just the first step and I am extremely grateful to Malcolm [Wilson] and M-Sport for this opportunity and their belief in my future."



CLOSING SHOT

The 2014 World Rally Championship is just weeks away, and with Rallye Monte-Carlo the season-opener prepped and primed, we all look forward to the forthcoming snow stages of Rally Sweden!

Photography by Nikara Media

