

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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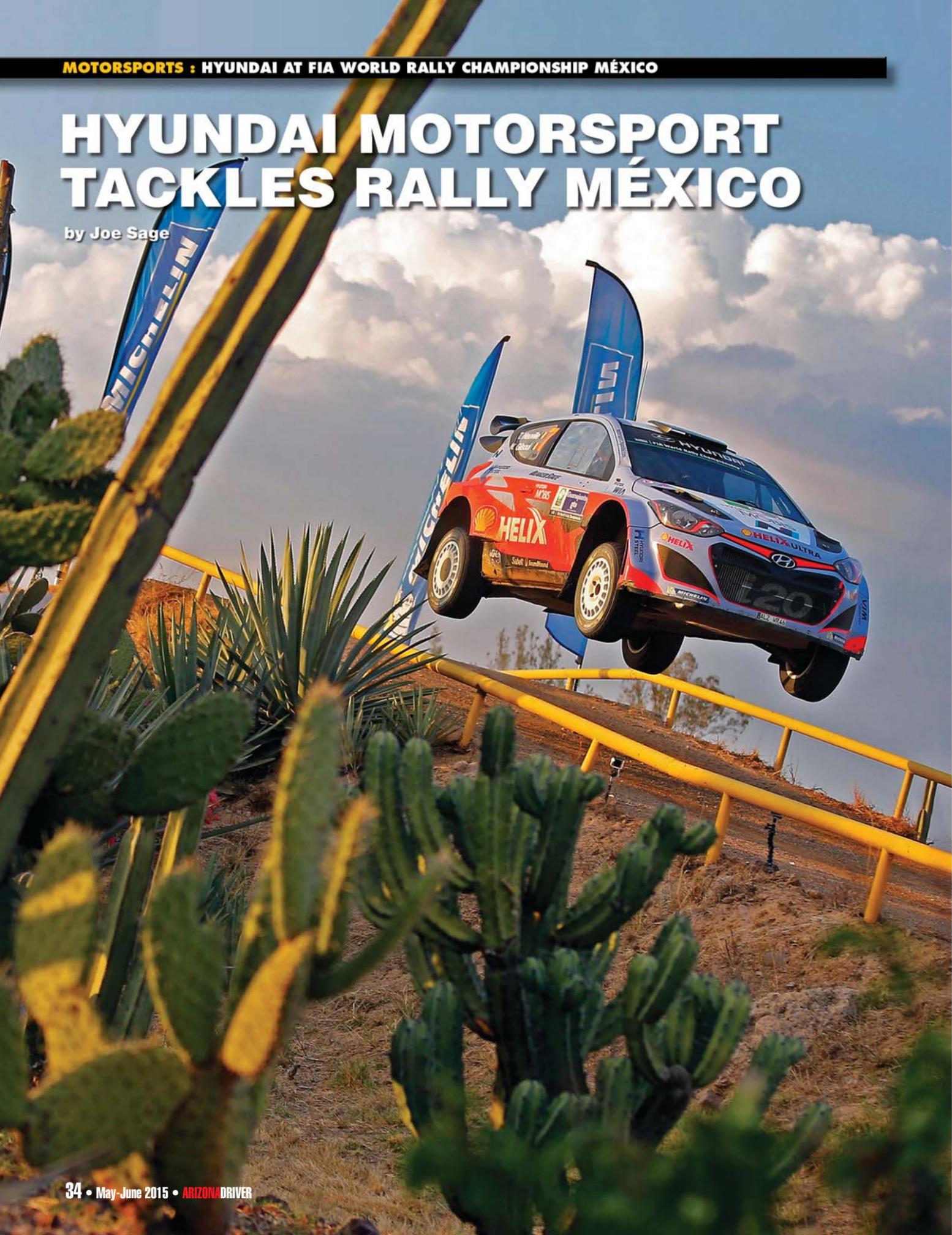
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HYUNDAI MOTORSPORT TACKLES RALLY MÉXICO

by Joe Sage



Established at the end of 2012, Hyundai Motorsport spent 2013 prepping for its FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) program, which debuted with the 2014 season. They have 120 team members from 23 countries working at an 88,000-square-foot headquarters in Alzenau, near Frankfurt, Germany. Hyundai teams grabbed 193 Drivers' Championship points in 2014, with the Hyundai Shell World Rally Team and Hyundai Motorsport N operations pooling 215 points in the Manufacturers' Championship.

Hyundai is now in its second season of WRC, which opened in Monte Carlo in January and was now headed to Mexico for its third round, from Thursday March 5 to Sunday March 8.

The Hyundai i20 WRC

The crews race brand new Hyundai i20 WRC rally cars, built from Hyundai's global i20 model—a supermini hatchback that slots in one size down from the global i30, familiar to us domestically as the hot-selling Hyundai Elantra. (The i30, i20 and a tiny i10 are sold in most of the rest of the world, including in Mexico.)

The Hyundai i20 WRC car has a turbocharged direct injection 1600cc four-cylinder engine, fitted with a mandatory 33mm air restrictor, with an output of 300 bhp at 6000 rpm and 295 lb-ft of torque at 5000 rpm. This feeds through a six-speed sequential gearbox to four-wheel drive with mechanical front and rear differentials, controlled by hydraulic power-assisted rack and pinion steering.

Brembo ventilated disc brakes (355mm for asphalt, 300mm for gravel) have air-cooled four-piston calipers, augmented by a hydraulic handbrake. A reinforced steel and composite fiber body with welded multi-point roll cage sits atop MacPherson struts with adjustable dampers front and rear.

For Rally Mexico, team partner Michelin supplied LTX Force H4 and S4 tires. (The H4 hard compound is for abrasive, hard-wearing dry surfaces and temperatures above 60 degrees Fahrenheit. The S4 is softer, for use on wet or damp gravel and in cooler temperatures.)

Lubricant is Shell Helix-Ultra, and fuel is FIA-approved Carless, with 80 liters (21 gallons) on board. Driver and codriver settle into Sabelt seats with multiple fixing points and adjustable straps, working a Magneti Marelli SRG Engine Control Unit and instrument panel. The car weighs in at 2646 pounds, or 2998 with driver and codriver.

The drivers and course

The WRC course in Mexico is rough, tough, challenging and often clever. In Hyundai's maiden 2014 season, a large bottle of Corona beer was used to top off a holed radiator, enabling driver Thierry Neuville of Belgium to claim Hyundai's first WRC

(At left) Belgian driver Thierry Neuville and co-driver Nicolas Gilsoul grab some air on Saturday in their #7 Hyundai i20 WRC rally car.

(At right) Meet Hyundai Motorsport's competition teams: Dani Sordo and Marc Martí of Spain in the #8 car; Thierry Neuville and Nicolas Gilsoul of Belgium in the #7 car; and Hayden Paddon and John Kennard of New Zealand in the #20 car.

podium in Mexico—its first gravel event ever. (Hyundai also made the podium in Poland last year, while Neuville and driver Dani Sordo of Spain had a memorable 1-2 finish in Germany—their first WRC victory, achieved in their first year.)

Neuville and fellow Belgian codriver Nicolas Gilsoul placed number two in Sweden, the second rally this year. We tuned in as they traveled again to nearby Mexico, to compete in the third rally of the season—based in León, in Guanajuato state, roughly 100 miles east-northeast of Guadalajara.

High temperatures and high altitudes are important elements of Rally Mexico, where the route peaks with a season-high climb to 8980 feet above sea level, where engines can lose 20 percent power in the thin air. Temperatures can approach 90 degrees F, putting stress on engines and transmissions, not to mention drivers and codrivers. There are rocky gravel roads throughout, but also a few short stages on asphalt, which the drivers have to tackle with the vehicle still on gravel settings.

Rally Mexico was kicking off a six-event run of gravel rallies in the WRC and was the first hot gravel round since Rally Australia last September.

The start and opening stage were in Guanajuato, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with the first stage running through the city's old mining tunnels, an underground format unique in WRC. Much of the rally was in familiar mountain terrain of the Sierra de Lobos and Sierra de Guanajuato.

New this year were three visits to the Autodromo de León race track—with two laps of the 2.3km circuit closing out action on Thursday, Friday and Saturday—and two new 1.37km street stages in León city center on Friday and Saturday. Even with these changes and this much variety in the route, Rally Mexico is one of the most compact in the WRC, with about 40 percent of its 1000.59km (621.74 miles) run against the clock.

Sordo and fellow Spaniard codriver Marc Martí rejoined the team for Mexico, after Sordo missed Sweden due to an injury. Hayden Paddon of New Zealand had replaced Sordo in that round, claiming a career-best fifth. He and fellow Kiwi codriver John Kennard would be running in Mexico for the first time. With Neuville and Gilsoul also in Mexico, Hyundai fielded three competing teams.

Hyundai also maintains a test crew comprising



Spanish driver Dani Sordo and codriver Marc Martí burn through the Sierra de Lobos and Sierra de Guanajuato in their #8 Hyundai i20 WRC car at elevations reaching 8980 feet during Friday's stages.

Kevin Abbring of the Netherlands and Sebastian Marshall of Great Britain.

FRIDAY

On the first full day of Rally Mexico 2015, Neuville won two stages (SS1 & SS5) and put up a strong fight for the overall rally lead throughout Friday, till a puncture led to a roll in the afternoon. The team would have to check damage to see whether Neuville might continue on Saturday under Rally 2 regulations—rejoining with a five-minute penalty.

Paddon, running in Mexico for the first time, had his first full day cut short early after hitting a rock in the second stage. He, too, would have to rejoin under Rally 2 regulations on Saturday.

But by the end of the day's eight stages, Sordo—feeling good after returning from his time on the injured list—was the top-placed Hyundai driver, in sixth place, heading into Saturday.

The Hyundai team was optimistic that their high-altitude adjustments were working well.

CLASSIFICATION AFTER DAY ONE

6. D.Sordo / M.Martí.....	+1:40.5
19. T.Neuville / N.Gilsoul.....	+21:04.3
27. H.Paddon / J.Kennard.....	+49:05.6

SATURDAY

The Hyundai team had worked hard to ensure both Neuville and Paddon could rejoin Sordo for Saturday's stages, fixing both cars in the required time to allow all three Hyundai i20 WRCs to start.

Sordo ran top-four times in all four stages Saturday morning, including a stage win in the 11.07km El Brinco stage. A gearbox problem was addressed with a swap at lunchtime, but a front-left puncture in SS15 impacted his run in the final stages. "I had one spare soft tire with me, but to cover almost 60km," Sordo explained, "so I adopted a cautious approach." Nonetheless, Sordo finished Day Two in 5th place.

Neuville put Friday's disappointment behind him with a series of strong performances. He pushed hard to reclaim lost time and positions on this next-to-last day, showcasing his abilities with Mexico's unforgiving stages and highlighting the performance potential of the car.

Paddon's Rally 2 status put him first on the road for Saturday's eight stages, a disadvantage on dry gravel that was still at its loosest. He also experienced a loss of power during high afternoon temperatures. Still, he made it to the end of Saturday with no disabling issues and would seek to finish

KEEP RIGHT >>



(Top to bottom) Earth, wind, fire and water: the team ran hot and heavy in the desert sun, catching air, kicking up dirt and blasting through creeks. An army of team mechanics was at the ready when miracles were needed and needed now. The event included stages in mining tunnels below the streets of Guanajuato and through the streets of León. Driver Thierry Neuville of Belgium greets the fans.

his first Rally Mexico on a high note the next day.

Team Principal Michel Nandan, the man responsible for building both the team and German facilities from scratch, said, "This is very typical of Rally Mexico, which can often be a rollercoaster of emotion. Dani started the day strongly by setting some impressive stage times, including a stage win in SS13. This allowed him to reduce the gap to fourth place. We had to change his gearbox over lunchtime service, but then he hit trouble in SS15 when he had a front left puncture which lost a lot of time. Carrying just one spare tire, he had to take a steady approach to the final stages. We take comfort from the fact he is still in the top five, but it's been a mixed day overall."

CLASSIFICATION AFTER DAY TWO

- 5. D.Sordo / M.Martí+4:10.6
- 11. T.Neuville / N.Gilsoul.....+22:23.8
- 20. H.Paddon / J.Kennard.....+53:18.3

SUNDAY

The final day included three stages—the monster 55.82km Guanajuatito stage, which could prove decisive, the 10.54km Derramadero stage, and the El Brinco 3 finale, where Power Stage points would be up for grabs.

Sordo held on for his 5th place finish, even as pain from his injury returned during Sunday's stages, with his best result of the season to date.

One of the fastest on opening day with two stage wins before his roll, Neuville fought back effectively from his Rally 2 Saturday, claiming 8th place in the rally overall. In fact, he put in a particularly strong performance in the longest stage, Sunday's monster Guanajuatito stage; took a stage win in the SS20 Derramadero; and finished third in the final El Brinco 3 stage, for an important Power Stage point.

Paddon carried the burden of Friday's setbacks and an up-front restart on Saturday under Rally 2. But he gained much knowledge of the car's handling on gravel, while staying among the top 10 in points for the season to date.

FINAL CLASSIFICATION (PRECERTIFICATION)

- 5. D.Sordo / M.Martí+5:01.8
- 8. T.Neuville / N.Gilsoul.....+22:43.3
- 17. H.Paddon / J.Kennard.....+54:20.5

Conquering every challenge along the way, all three Hyundai i20 WRC rally cars finished the



grueling 21-stage event. The team also scored valuable Manufacturer points.

Sébastien Ogier of France swept the first three rallies this year, driving a Volkswagen Polo R WRC.

With four stage wins and a Power Stage point, Hyundai Motorsport continued to hold second place in the Manufacturers' Championship as they headed to the next event in Rally Argentina, again on gravel, determined to keep up the pace with the front-runners.

2015 FIA WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP DRIVERS' STANDINGS AFTER RALLY MEXICO

- 1: S.Ogier (VW Polo R WRC)81 points
- 2: A.Mikkelsen (VW).....47 points
- 3: T.Neuville (Hyundai i20 WRC)35 points
- 7: D.Sordo (Hyundai).....18 points
- 10: H.Paddon (Hyundai)10 points

Following Argentina, the balance of the year is a series of mostly European rallies, other than Australia in September. The season finale takes place in Wales, in November. Hyundai Motorsport's key objectives are to keep developing their crew, which was built from scratch, while honing development of the new generation i20 WRC. We'll follow the team with interest, especially looking forward to next year's stop in Mexico. ■

