

Ford Abu Dhabi world rally driver, Khalid Al Qassimi, fought courageously to overcome a marathon Neste Oil Rally Finland in the World Rally Championship (WRC) this weekend, surviving a combination of quick and narrow tracks that tested the world's best to their limits



Al Qassimi's steely performance, although unrewarded with a no-points 14th place finish, revealed a driver who has grown in maturity and experience since his debut appearance in the premiere off-road motorsport series exactly four years ago.

"A few years ago I would have crashed on such a challenging event, without a doubt," said the ADTA-backed driver. "I tried to stay level-headed and attack each stage one at a time – knowing that other drivers were retiring around me."

The 21-stage Neste Oil Rally Finland, round eight of the 13-event WRC calendar, expected drivers to contest a staggering 1,355km in just over two days; journeying to Lahti along the west shores of Lake Päijänne – alien territory to Al Qassimi and most drivers since its removal from

the event in the 1980s.

On a WRC round nicknamed ‘the Finnish Grand Prix’ for its lightening quick stage times, slippery and dauntingly gravel roads, flat-out, tree-lined straights, endless bumps and blind crests, Al Qassimi retained his cool in thick humidity to keep his fourth WRC campaign on course.

“The treacherous gravel roads and long days required intense periods of concentration, and after a six week break from WRC, I’m relieved to have completed one of the most difficult events on the calendar,” said Al Qassimi, the most successful Arab WRC driver in terms of points scored.



Citroen’s Sebastien Loeb, the seven-time world champion, claimed victory at Neste Oil Rally Finland for only the second time after he lead for the entire three days. A Qassimi’s Ford Abu Dhabi teammates Jari-Matti Latvala and Miikka Anttila finished in second place, just 8.1 seconds behind Loeb, after an encounter that blended tactical skills and outright speed.

Abu Dhabi's other Flying Finns, Mikko Hirvonen and Jarmo Lehtinen, staged a superb recovery to finish fourth after losing two minutes when they hit a tree in Thursday evening's opening speed test. Hirvonen's fight-back brought him to within 69.1sec of the winner as the 30-year-old Finn reeled off a string of special stage wins. He remains second in the drivers' standings.