

Breen: World Rally Academy dream still alive

■ Trevor McGrath

After competing on the abrasive gravel surface of Portugal, the undulating tracks in Sardinia and the high-speed jumps in Finland, a challenge of a different kind awaits Waterford rally driver Craig Breen next weekend in the World Rally Championship. ADAC Rallye Deutschland, round four of the season starts next Friday and is the first tarmac event of the year. The rally itself could be a pivotal event as to finding who will take championship glory in this inaugural WRC Academy season. Craig had a tremendous drive at WRC Finland being narrowly defeated by series leader Egon Kaur who took the honors by just 2.6 sec. Now the Kilmurphy man must win on German soil if he is to keep his championship aspirations alive.

Breen has held the lead on all of the opening three rounds to date but WRC Finland two weeks ago was his first finish without resorting to 'Superally'. He dominated the first event in Portugal in March and was leading with only four stages remaining when he misjudged a corner and when off the road ending up stranded and recording a non finish.

On round two in Sardinia at the start of May, Breen show a lot of grit and determination when near the start of stage four, Craig fell victim to a rock that had been exposed by the front runners. The offending hazard ruptured the sump on his Fiesta R2 immediately sending him into retirement for the day. Breen was then left to return on day two under 'Superally Rules', which allow a driver to re-enter on the second day's action but under a time penalty.

After taking Friday evening to recompose, a fully focused Breen emerged on Saturday morning and with

a repaired R2, the Irishman was back setting fastest class times, the benefit of this being that a championship point is awarded for each fastest stage time in the class.

After starting the day in eighth position Craig gained three places by the midday service and with only three stages remaining, a haul of 10 points looked on the cards from his fifth position. There was another sting in the tail however as on stage 13, Craig looked on course to set another fastest time but as he reeled in the competitor he was



hampered by the trailing dust.

On to the last stage and only a few kilometres in when Craig saw a flash in his door mirror and felt a jolt from the rear of the car. Then to his amazement he spotted one of his rear wheels had sheered off. With the car pulling to one side the Irish/Welsh crew were left to nurse the car to the end of the stage and hope they could get the ailing Ford Fiesta back to the finish. After exiting the stage and dropping over three minutes they accessed the damage and with determination of true champions got the car back to Olbia (Rally HQ).

The championship reached the halfway mark in Finland on the last weekend of July and as Breen took to the stages near Jyväskylä he had little to show for his efforts to this point. But it was on

the ultra fast gravel tracks in the home of rallying that Breen showed all his talent. 2010 was the third year in a row that Craig had taken on the event and he put all his experience to good use in what turned out to be a nail biting with Estonian driver Egon Kaur.

Breen suffered some handling issues on the opening Thursday evening's three tests but as the action resumed on Friday morning, Breen and Kaur were in a class of their own and pulled away from the other crews in the academy class. Kaur took over the class lead on stage seven and by midday service held a 15 second advantage. Breen however hit back over the afternoon's stages to take two fastest times and hold a 2.4 second overnight lead.

Craig however still feels his title dream is still alive. "I was bitterly disappointed after coming so close in Finland but I absolutely believe I can still win the title. My times were right up there which gives me a lot of confidence going into the Tarmac rallies."

Rallye Deutschland is the first of two asphalt events with Rallye de France coming up in late September. "It's going to be difficult in Germany", says Craig "It's a tarmac event but very specialized, the only option I have is to go for the win but drivers like Jan Cerny and Andrea Crugnola are good on Tarmac and will be out to prove a point.

Germany will be my second WRC event this year after Sardinia that I'll be taking on for the first time. After Finland two weeks ago I quickly decided to take in an asphalt event at home in Ireland last weekend. With the first half of the Academy season being dominated by gravel rallies.

"I've only been out on tarmac once this year and that was in my S2000 Fiesta on my home event the Ravens Rock Rally. Last Sunday's Stonethrowers Rally, based in Clonmel gave me the ideal opportunity to get my tarmac legs back in action and now I'm ready for Germany."