

Flying Breen delivers on rich, rich promise and future looks bright

HE is only 20-years-old but Slieverue based rally driver, Craig Breen is one of the hottest young prospects on the international stage. He just drives from success to success. Here Trevor McGrath relives the highs and lows from the past two exciting seasons for the Carrick-on-Suir Motor Club member.

Trevor McGrath

"IT WAS probably the most stressful moment of my whole life, but the hard work has paid off. It's time to take the next step. This is a massive opportunity. I'm just thrilled and in awe of what is going to happen next year."

Slieverue rally driver, Craig Breen looked back with delight and forward with high hopes after what has been a near unbelievable season on the professional circuit. In 2009 he enjoyed a super season when he won virtually all before him.

The next step would be difficult and those well versed in the ways of the rally world expected a blip. There wasn't one really. Craig continued to drive forward like a champion in waiting.

Six rounds of the World Rally Championship in a Fiesta R2 and an intense training regime from ESP (Elite Sport Performance) is the here and now for him. Driving in the World Rally Championship waits.

"That's what I wanted," insisted Breen, who realises that he has come far and that there is a long way to go if he is to make it to the top, but he is ready for the challenge. "We're going to be on the world championship stage in front of the right people, doing the right events. It's a great opportunity."

Craig Breen was talking after becoming the first Irish driver to win a place on the FIA's Pirelli Star Driver WRC academy scheme. Craig's win in the Pirelli Star Driver Shootout came near the end of October.

Championship waits.

Now let's rewind nearly 12 months and take a look at how the Kilkenny driver's 2010 season transpired.

The 2009 Billy Coleman award winner definitely had the Midas touch last season. Multiple Fiesta Sport Trophy championships were followed by him being crowned Irish junior champion. He then rounded off the year by winning a 12 month contract with M-Sport.

Season had started

That meant one thing: "There would be a lot of eyes on the young driver."

The Craig Breen rallying season started, or should I say "didn't stop" after his last event in 2009. Over the Christmas holiday season Craig was busy nailing down his sponsorship line up as he had decided to go the Super 2000 route.

On a crisp day in late January, Craig officially launched his all new Ford Fiesta S2000. He also announced a major new sponsorship team including Motorsport Ireland, the Irish Sports Council, Keltech Eng, Pirelli, Castrol and Suirway Forklifts but the predominately blue inverted car most importantly carried the name 'Kick Energy'.

Craig's biggest Christmas cracker was to lure Mr Steve Perez and his company Globalbrands on board as main sponsor. Breen was also honoured by his home Motor Club in Carrick-

on-Suir on the day of the press launch by a Mayoral reception for his achievements in 2009. The high profile guests included Gerard Quinn, Ford's Director of Motorsport in Europe, and Joe Corcoran, president of Motorsport Ireland.

With Breen at the wheel of the Fiesta S2000 he stepped up to be one of the main contenders in both the MSA British rally championship and the Citroen Irish tarmac championship. Across the water Craig would still find himself up against an Irishman as Cork native Keith Cronin was out to retain his 2009 title. On top of that Welshman Gwindiff Evens was back on the stages and ready to show the young guns he still had plenty to offer.

On the home front, the ITC challenge was going to be just as hard. The little Fiesta was up against the might of the WRC cars and seasoned campaigners in Gareth MacHale, Tim McNulty and Derek McGarrity. In the Group N class that

Breen would also be fighting for was also Alstair Fisher, who had grown during the 2009 season and his talent was coming to the fore. Learning a totally new car, battling top competition in both BRC and ITC was going to make an interesting year and still Craig hadn't enough.

He wanted to pit his talent against the best on the world stage. And so a return to World Rally Finland and World Rally Great Britain were also pencilled in.

Dulux Trade MSA British rally

The six round British Championship got underway in late March with the Bulldog International Rally in Welsppoo on the Wales/England border. Craig was eager to get his BRC season off with a top performance but the UK debut