

Breen hits back with Academy win

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Irishman Craig Breen blew the **WRC Academy** title race wide open with his maiden win in the series, making the most of a difficult weekend for series leader Egon Kaur.

Yeray Lemes, a known asphalt specialist who won the last-ever Junior WRC round in Spain last year, set a scorching pace early on, with Breen happy to cling to his coat-tails and hope that Lemes would drive himself into a mistake through going so fast.

Breen refused to panic, even though he was 35 seconds behind at the halfway mark on Friday night, and his attitude eventually paid dividends when Lemes had a major overshoot on SS9 on Saturday morning and lost almost a minute getting back on course. That put Breen into the lead by 17 seconds, and he lost just five through the first Panzerplatte test, SS10, helped by Lemes losing third gear late on.

Now in control of the situation, Breen promised a maximum attack through the final four stages of the two-day event to try and hold onto his lead. Having retained an advantage of 9.6 seconds going into Panzerplatte again for the last stage, Breen drove the stage of his life to beat Lemes by 5.5 seconds and break Kaur's stranglehold on the series.

"That was the absolute edge of traction – the hardest I have ever driven any rally car," said Breen of his final-stage success. "Every single corner was spot-on and we didn't have a single close call."

What made Breen's result even sweeter was Kaur suffering a puncture on that final test. Kaur had impressed over the two days despite his somewhat limited Tarmac experience, but the flat Pirelli dropped him from fifth to eighth, and allowed Breen to halve his points lead from 52 points to 26.

Alastair Fisher shone in the early stages, running close to Breen, but fell back with a puncture on SS6, the final test of Friday. An off later in the test that caused some frontal damage to his Fiesta didn't help matters either: He went into Saturday just hoping to get himself back into the points, and would have taken seventh had he not emulated Kaur in suffering his own flat tyre on the last test. The Ulsterman claimed ninth instead, and remains tenth in the points as a result.

In the **Super 2000 WRC** event, a nightmare weekend for Juho

Hänninen allowed Ott Tänak to claim a comfortable victory and reduce Hänninen's points lead to 18 with two rounds to go.

Hänninen, unsurprisingly given his form on Tarmac so far this year, set the early pace on Friday, but Tänak had already started eating into his lead on Friday afternoon when the Finn hit trouble. In an uncharacteristic error, Hänninen smashed into a rock late on in the day's final stage, SS6, that caused him to retire from the leg. There was no way he could have compared notes with his Red Bull Skoda team-mate Hermann Gassner Jr to alert himself to the rock, as Gassner hit the very same obstacle and also retired...

With Martin Prokop having speared off and out of the opening leg on SS2, Tänak was suddenly left with a comfortable advantage, and he was able to turn down the pace to win by nearly six minutes.

"I thought it would be very difficult on Tarmac against Hänninen and Prokop, and I didn't have a good feeling on Friday morning, but on Friday afternoon it was much better and we went from there," said the young Estonian.

Karl Kruuda ran second on Saturday, but fell back with a puncture on SS8 that cost him nearly a minute. That left Nasser Al-Attiyah in the runner-up spot in his first-ever asphalt rally, ahead of Hungarian Frigyes Turan. Attrition allowed Hänninen to recover to fourth, despite an oil leak and a puncture on Saturday.

Results

WRC Academy (all cars Ford Fiesta R2): 1 Craig Breen (IRL)/ Gareth Roberts (GBR), 3h 07m 54.0s; 2 Yeray Lemes (ESP)/ Rogelio Penate (ESP), +15.1s; 3 Andrea Crugnola (ITA)/ Michele Ferrara (ITA), +1m 43.2s; 4 Jose Suarez (ESP)/ Candido Carrera (ESP), +1m 58.2s; 5 Jan Cerny (CZE)/ Pavel Kohout (CZE), +2m 26.0s; 6 Fredrik Ahlin (SWE)/ Morten Erik Abrahamson (NOR), +3m 08.5s.

Standings after 4/6 rounds: 1 Egon Kaur (EST) 92pts, 2 Breen 66; 3 Brendan Reeves (AUS) 36, 4 Lemes 35, 5 Cerny 33, 6 Crugnola 31, etc. **Other British and Irish:** 10 Alastair Fisher (GBR) 18. **Next round:** Rally France, September 30/October 1.

Super 2000 WRC: 1 Ott Tänak (EST)/ Kuldar Sikk (EST), Ford Fiesta S2000, 3h 46m 04.8s; 2 Nasser Al-Attiyah (QAT)/ Giovanni Bernacchini (ITA), Ford Fiesta S2000, +5m 38.6s; 3 Frigyes Turan (HUN)/ Gabor Zsiris (HUN), Ford Fiesta S2000, +8m 03.3s; 4 Juho Hänninen (FIN)/ Mikko Markkula (FIN), Skoda Fabia S2000, +11m 37.1s; 5 Karl Kruuda (EST)/ Martin Jarveoja (EST), Skoda Fabia S2000, +14m 51.8s; 6 Martin Prokop (CZE)/ Jan Tománek (CZE), Ford Fiesta S2000, +26m 46.1s.

Standings after 6/8 rounds: 1 Hänninen 98pts, 2 Tänak 80, 3 Prokop 76, 4 Kruuda 58, 5= Bernardo Sousa (POR) and Hermann Gassner Jr (GER) 55, etc. **Next round:** Rally France, September 30-October 2.