



Craig Breen was the best of the Irish entries in his Peugeot 207

There is no question the rally, won by Škoda's engaging World Super 2000 champion Juho Hanninen, was hailed as a real success by team bosses and drivers.

Hanninen loved it, and why wouldn't he after it provided him with his first IRC win on tarmac and the first by a driver from mainland Europe to take top spot since fellow-Finn Pentti Airikkala back in 1979.

Essentially the Škoda team's gravel specialist, he told me before the start that the Irish roads were like forest stages only with tarmac on top. He felt right at home.

His battle with reigning champion Andreas Mikkelsen was titanic right up until the moment the Norwegian made an inexplicable mistake on the Lisburn Power Stage and all but knocked himself out. But it has to be said that Mikkelsen always looked to be on the ragged edge whereas Hanninen was coolness personified.

But it made for a great duel, the two of them completely overshadowing the third Škoda of a subdued Jan Kopecky, supposedly the team's tarmac expert.

The real disappointment was that Craig Breen and Alastair Fisher never got a real opportunity to challenge for a podium place.

Breen, driving a Peugeot 207 for the French Sainteloc team for the first time, struggled initially with the set-up of the car and then was hit by the hammer blow of a failed fuel pump which cost him 90 seconds in road penalties. But his fightback to fifth showed what might have been.

Fisher, too, was slow out of the blocks in his M-Sport Ford Fiesta but had found a better set-up and rhythm after the first service halt and popped up with a time which equalled Mikkelsen as the first day drew to a close. But day two brought his downfall, the Fiesta sliding wide on a patch of gravel and clouting a bank which broke the steering.

Robert Barrable, Garry Jennings, the Moffett brothers and Marty McCormack all upheld Irish honours even if Hanninen expressed surprise that the local drivers had not posed a greater threat.

There were negatives of course. Like the over-hyped and over-priced Titanic Quarter stage. Yes, it cost a lot to create the stage and a huge amount of effort – and money – went into promoting it but the truth is fans in the thousands the organisers had hoped for were never going to pay through the nose to go there when the rest of the rally is free to view, including the Lisburn Power Stage.

Many competitors in the National

Rally felt they were marginalised and over-looked. And they were, even with the likes of Eugene Donnelly and Derek McGarrity, who have won the Circuit seven times between them, in the line up.

It is difficult to link an IRC event with a national status rally when there are different regulations and different specifications of cars involved. For space reasons, for instance, they were (mostly) exiled to a separate service area some distance from the main base and this only served to emphasise the 'them' and 'us' feeling.

There was very little contact between the two sections of the rally and from talking to a number of national category competitors I know they did not feel part of the actual Circuit.

A way must be found to create a greater integration or many of the Irish drivers will stay away – and then there won't be a problem with space.

Nevertheless, all credit to Willis, Gordon Noble and the rest of the team. They have put the Circuit of Ireland back on the world rally map again but the big questions have now to be answered.

Will Willis extend his agreement with the Ulster Automobile Club and continue to run the rally?

Will the government, via the Northern

Ireland Tourist Board, continue to support it?

And where does the IRC go from here? Sadly, for largely economic reasons it is no longer the global series it was when Kris Meeke won back in 2009, is now confined to European rallies. A number of participating manufacturers has dropped off too, leaving it, for the moment, a Škoda benefit even if Mikkelsen and Dani Sordo disrupted the status quo in Corsica.

The strong word is that the IRC will soon morph into a re-constituted European championship.

This is a series which has long been unwieldy, unimportant and ignored by all but a handful of countries and competitors. But it was interesting that Škoda chose to target it this year with Hanninen, already an IRC and World S2000 champion, tasked with the job of winning it.

With Eurosport involvement and guaranteed television coverage from the satellite broadcaster, the European championship could be transformed into something meaningful to manufacturers.

The Circuit was a round of the European championship many years ago but it was at a time when the series consisted of dozens of events and was categorised by a co-efficient ratings system. To be on the lower rungs, as the Circuit was, meant nothing other than a hook on which to chase tourist board support.

It is now a 12-round series, without the co-efficient system, and already includes IRC rallies like Ypres and Ballyshannon as well as former events such as Malmedy and Asturias.

Could there be a place for the Circuit? Willis is confident it would be included if the money can be found to continue to run it at the level he has now raised.

He would like to extend it across the border, bringing back more of a 'British' feel to it, and possibly attract additional financial support from the tourist authorities.

Within the next month or so, having taken stock of the 2012 accounts and sounded out the prospects of continued government backing, he will make a decision on whether to carry on or hand the rally back to the Ulster Automobile Club.



Garry Jennings was the fastest in Group N, finishing in 8th place

