



Craig Breen at last weekend's press conference.

### ■ Trevor McGrath

CRAIG Breen has pulled off an incredible victory on the World Rallye de France to now lead the championship going into the final round next month in Spain.

Breen, partnered by Paul Nagle clenched his third win of the season in extraordinary style on the final day when long-time class leader Hayden Paddon crashed out with two stages remaining, leaving Breen on hand to benefit from the New Zealander's ill fortune.

The Irish driver had battled with Paddon over the opening two days but fell back with a mechanical problem on Saturday afternoon. Craig started the final day third in the class and had recovered to second when Paddon had his accident.

The rally began on Thursday evening with the spectacular backdrop of Strasbourg's city centre playing host to the opening superspecial stage. Craig kicked off setting the fastest time in SWRC to take a narrow overnight lead.

The tarmac event really started on Friday morning when the crews took on the asphalt stages in the Vosge Mountains, 70 km's south of Strasbourg and it wasn't long before a battle ensued between Craig and New Zealander, Hayden Paddon. The Kiwi drew first blood by setting fastest class times over stages two and three, taking the category lead by 11.4 seconds.

Breen then hit back on the fourth test to claw 13.1 back on his rival and retake the lead by 2.1 by midday service.

Paddon began the afternoon with fastest time on SS5 and by stage seven had extended it to 4.1 seconds.

The 'Mulhouse' Superspecial set the scene for the final test of the day and Craig had the last say going fastest leaving the overnight gap between himself and Paddon to just 2.2 seconds.

Saturday was the longest day of the rally with 192.80 km's of competitive stage action including eight stages in a loop of four in the morning, repeated in the afternoon. It turned into a frustrating day for Craig with Paddon picking up where he left off on Friday and he saw the Kiwi driver extend his lead to 15 seconds by midday service. Craig had targeted the 'Pays d'Ormont' stage, the longest of the event at 43 Km's as one to gain time on but as a result of an accident by an earlier competitor, the stage was stopped before the SWRC crews could drive through and Craig was thwarted from his attack. Then stage twelve was also cancelled on safety ground because of large volumes of spectators adding to Craig's

annoyance.

There was drama for Craig on the first test in the afternoon when the rear differential broke on his Ford Fiesta, he continued through the three remaining stages but dropped to third in the class, 2 minutes 13 seconds behind leader Paddon and 14.9 sec behind Yazeed Al-Rajhi.

Craig's service crew were able to replace the ailing differential in the final service of the day and his Ford Fiesta was back to full power.

The final day consisted of a double loop of three stages totally 60 kms but the sting in the tail came by way of NO service between the loops.

Breen stormed through SS17 retaking 2nd but Al-Rajhi fought back on SS18 when he moved ahead of the Irish driver. On the final stage in the first loop Craig pushed and was rewarded with a 5.5 second advantage with three stages to go. At the head of the SWRC field, Hayden Paddon was controlling his pace and remained in the class lead.

The rally and the championship took a HUGE turn on stage 20, when Paddon went off the road. He did manage after some time to get out of the stage but it was a sad end for him. As a result of Paddon off, Craig was elevated into the lead and he pulled another 6.1 on Al-Rajhi with two stages remaining.

On the penultimate stage Breen pulled out another 32 seconds to lead by 44 going into the last and on that ultra-nervous test Craig drove through very cautiously to take an unbelievable win.

An ecstatic Breen was thrilled with the win. "For sure it's a good win but I've been very lucky. What happened to Hayden was very unfortunate. Where he went off, it could have happened to anyone of us. Ok, we had some descent speed in the beginning, not enough to match Hayden and we suffered mechanical problems yesterday. Today was just unbelievable; the overnight rain made conditions treacherous, we were pushed by Yazeed (Al-Rajhi) and after getting in front were in the right place to benefit from Hayden's accident. I'm in a good position now going into the final round in Spain but we need to put in a good effort to get prepared but I think we will have a good package."

#### SWRC Provisional Points Table after World Rallye France are:

1. Craig Breen	93 points
2. P-G Andersson	91 points
3. Yazeed Al-Rajhi	73 points
4. Hayden Paddon	68 points
5. Maciej Oleksowicz	65 points
6. Tom Cave	18 points