

By Andrew Murphy

RALLY Ireland organisers and marshals deserve all the credit heaped on them after the smooth running of the opening round of the 2009 world championship series run in atrocious conditions in the north west last weekend.

The teams and drivers had some grouses, but they were more at the prevailing conditions and the standing water on the stages than the event organisation. Sebastian Loeb was critical of the tyre arrangement, which for some extraordinary reason had snow-ice tyres available rather than the wet weather tyres needed for the prevailing conditions.

■ The small number of world championship contenders highlights the reform needed for the World Rally Championship and Max Mosley intends to improve the series before he hands over to his successor. His attendance at the ceremonial start at Enniskillen Castle augurs well for the next Rally Ireland in 2011. The event this year created history as it was the first world championship event ever to transmit a super special stage live globally on the internet. It featured the Donegal Town stage.

■ The national rally season gets underway when the Tipperary club hosts the opening rounds of the Petro Systems forestry and the national junior championships on the Mitchellstown-based Sean Conlon Memorial rally on Sunday.

As he returns to defend his title Ray Breen faces some tough competition especially from John Reid and Denis Cronin - second and third in last

year's championship - and from the ever-improving Keith Cronin, 2007 forestry Group N champion and Billy Coleman award winner, and James Murphy and PJ McGrath.

Patsy Keenan who travels from America to compete in Group N will line up against Pat O'Connell, Pat Price and Mark Murphy and Mark Sheehan, while Frank Kelly, Brian Lawlor, Seamus O'Connell, Mick Nevin and Ray Benskin are all in the frame for 2WD class honours.

The national junior championship - the other major series kicking off this weekend - has attracted 12 drivers who will be aiming not only for nomination in the Billy Coleman Award, but also the star prize offered by current competitors Darragh Rafferty and Enda Hallinan of a funded drive in a Group N Subaru on four rounds of the 2010 forestry championship.

■ Top seed in the junior section Craig Breen - a class winner in Galway - has swapped the Fiesta for a Citroen C2R2 and has yet to nominate a co-driver. He faces John Byrnes in a similar car, JP Ruth (Civic) and Vincent McAree (Peugeot 106), with Claran O'Connor, John O'Connor, Kevin Gallagher and Shane Devane ready to pounce should any of the front-runners hit a problem.

■ The Coyne brothers - Michael and William - are set to resume battle for class honours as the rallycross season resumes at Mondello Park on Sunday. Carlow CC has a full entry for this popular branch of the sport.

■ Irish pairing Daniel Barry and Martin Brady is the only Irish crew on the Wyedean Rally this weekend, while Lucan karter Shane Crosbie will race in the Italian Winter Cup in Lanato Italy this weekend.



FAST CAT: Kilkenny teenager Craig Breen - a top ten finisher in Galway - swaps his Fiesta for a Citroen C2R2 for the Sean Conlon Memorial rally on Sunday

■ After their successful New Zealand outing, championship leaders Al Team Ireland undertook some technical testing at AIGP and Ferrari's request. Niall Quinn completed 56 laps without incident during which Ferrari engineers gathered data and performed an evaluation of the car's systems.

Team principal Mark Gallagher commented: "We were asked to help out and were happy to oblige. For reasons of fairness, we could not use Adam (Carroll) for this test, nor carry out any performance testing of benefit to the team, but it was useful for Niall to get some decent running in the car." The team's next outing is at Gauteng South Africa on February 20-22.

■ Regulations for the Cork MC Quality Hotels West Cork rally on March 14/15 are now available to download from corkmotorclub.com and westcorkrally.com. The two-day, 16-stage event counts both the Bones O'Connor Modified Challenge and the Southern Four championship. Historic and junior sections are incorporated into the event, as are a number of one-make series including the Honda Cup and the Irish Evo Challenge and C2R2 Irish Cup. Despite increased costs, the organisers are holding the entry fee at the 2008 price of €630. Junior competitors will get a refund of €100 on their entry fee if they marshal on the Saturday stages.

■ Dubliner Frank Fennell and co-driver Kevin Savage driving a Volvo 142 won the 3,000km Winter Trial run through Germany, Austria and Czech Republic.

■ Mitsubishi has withdrawn from all future cross-country rallies with immediate effect.

Winner of a total of 12 Dakar rallies - seven consecutive rallies - the Japanese company cited the deterioration of the global economy as the reason for their decision.

The British affiliate axed the two-car works team from this year's British rally championship for similar reasons.