

Crash costs Breen fairytale comeback

WATERFORD rally driver Craig Breen almost completed a fairytale comeback at World Rally Finland at the weekend.

Breen, who returned to top-flight rallying after the accident that claimed the life of his friend and former co-driver Gareth Roberts in Sicily in mid-June, was partnered by Kerry man Paul Nagle and had a dream start to the event. They were leading the SWRC field going into the penultimate stage but crashed on the first run of the famous 'Ouninpohja' stage.

Breen said: "I'm very disappointed to have crashed out so close to the end. The most important thing is that Paul and I are okay. Up to that stage I was really pleased with my performance. I showed a good pace without pushing too hard.

"I want to thank my whole team, my family and Gareth's family for their support during this time and special thanks to Paul (Nagle); he has come in under unbelievable circumstances and done a brilliant job. I also want to thank everyone again for their support in the time leading up to the event."

After setting the fourth-fastest time in the FIA Super 2000 World Rally Championship, there was huge emotion bubbling to the surface at the end of the opening 'Koukunmaa' stage,

"It's a sad feeling but I want to thank all the people who have given me the

courage to get here. I never thought I'd be in a rally car again, let alone with a time that was not so far off the pace," said Breen.

Three special stages were covered on Thursday as the rally got under way and Breen slotted in at fourth behind SWRC class leader and Finnish wild card entrant Esapekka Lappi, championship leader Hayden Paddon in second place and Proton driver PG Andersson in third.

Paddon was the first to hit trouble, retiring early on Day 2 with an engine problem and he was followed by Lappi when his power steering failed on stage nine and he suffered suspension damage. The Finn was able to continue under 'Rally 2' rules and finished in fifth place overall.

FAMOUS

This left Breen and Andersson to battle for the victory over Friday afternoon and the six famous Saturday stages.

The lead changed hands almost on a stage-by-stage basis on Friday but it was Ford Fiesta driver Breen who ended the day with a 3.7-second lead.

The final day consisted of six stages, finishing with a double run of 'Ouninpohja'. Breen held on to lead on the morning opener but 'PG' cut the gap to just 1.5 seconds over the stage (SS 13). On stage 14 (Leustu's 21.94 km), he contin-

ued to push and overhauled Breen to take the lead by 1.3 seconds.

The first drama of the final day came on stage 16 when Andersson broke a driveshaft dropping 13.3 seconds behind Breen. This was the biggest gap between the two since the start of the rally and the perfect return looked on the cards.

We were then down to the showpiece of the event, the double run of the 33km 'Ouninpohja'. Breen and Nagle began with that 13.3 second advantage and over the early splits were neck and neck with Andersson. Then, on 90-degree left, Breen went wide, sideways and off the gravel surface. Breen tried in vain to correct but from this point their Ford Fiesta was out of control and rolled over the grass before stopping.

It was a sad end to an almost perfect return but after such a heavy crash and what had happened just six weeks ago, the loss was put quickly into perspective.

Meanwhile, Gary Donnelly, Odhran Henry, Richie Faulkner, Darren Maher and Conor McCabe all scored double victories in yesterday's sixth round of the National Kart Racing Championships at Kiltorcan, Co Kilkenny.

DUBLINER Peter Grimes' hopes of staying in contention for a sixth Northern Ireland Autotest title took a dive when a broken driveshaft dropped him to 11th place in the Larne round at the weekend.