

Kilkenny's Breen wins Academy WRC

BY SAM MATTHEWS

Slieverue-born rally driver Craig Breen wrote his name into the history books last weekend, as he won the FIA World Rally Academy Championship following a dramatic battle right to the final stage of Rally Great Britain.

The 21-year-old coped with immense pressure to pull off the most significant result in recent Irish rallying history, and claim the €500,000 prize fund.

The odds had been stacked against Breen from the beginning. RallyGB is the final event of the rally calendar year, and Breen went into the race on 72 points, while his rival - Estonia's Egon Kaur - topped the table with 92 points.

An overall rally victory is worth 25 points, while second place earns 18 points.

As the weather turned and the rain set in, Breen did not relent - all the time conscious of the fact that he had to win the rally outright.

His rival Kaur made a slow start, but by day two had fought his way up to third place. He had moved into second place by the final day, after another Irish driver, Alastair Fisher, suffered a puncture and conceded his position.

Nerves were jangling as dawn broke on the final day of the event.

The final day's stages entailed a double loop of Hafren, Sweet Lamb and Myherin - three of the famous 'special stages' in World Rallying. As the leading car, Breen was the



Slieverue's Craig Breen holds the Tricolour aloft following his victory in the WRC Academy Championship

first Academy car on the road in each stage.

If positions stayed as they were - Breen first; Kaur second - the duo would be tied on overall championship points. The winner would be decided by fastest stage times over the year.

With just three stages to go, the Slieverue man needed to set the fastest time in all of them to overtake his rival and win the Championship.

The first two went according to plan.

The final stage of the day was a nail-biter, as Breen negotiated his last 27km of the year. Then it was a matter of wait-and-hope, as Kaur made his run.

As Breen, his co-driver Gareth Roberts, and the Breen supporters looked on, it became clear that Kaur was not going to be fast enough. Relief quickly turned to joy and celebration, as the enormity of what the young man had achieved

set in.

"I can't find words to describe this moment," said Breen.

"It's the most amazing feeling to finally get here after all the effort we've put in all year, all the ups and downs, we've made it to the finish."

Already, the young driver is looking to the future.

"It means onwards and upwards but this is a very small step on a big ladder and I can't wait for next season," he said.

"It's been one of the most important afternoons in my driving career and we've done exactly what we needed to do, nothing more, nothing less. A perfect day."



Breen's Ford Fiesta S2000 gets some air time in Rally Great Britain