

# Craig Breen Crowned FIA WRC Academy World Champion

■ Trevor McGrath

In an unbelievable climax to the FIA WRC Academy Championship Irish rally driver Craig Breen was crowned World Rally Championship Academy Champion and claimed a prize of €500,000 amidst jubilant scenes on Saturday evening in Wales at the end of Wales Rally Great Britain.

As the title went all the way to a cliff hanging final stage the 21-year-old from Waterford withstood the pressure to bring off the biggest win in recent Irish rallying history.

There were nail-biting scenes at the end of the final stage as Craig crossed the finish line but then was required to wait until his nearest championship rival Egon Kaur came through in a slower time.

It became clear as Kaur crossed the end of the test that he was down on time as Craig, his co-driver Gareth Breen (Ireland) and the Breen supporters were finally released and the Irish driver could celebrate his achievement.

The final event of the WRC Academy season sets a final round showdown, winner take all as Egon Kaur (Estonia) on 92 points and Craig Breen (Ireland) on 71 points were the only two competitors that could take the title. The WRC Academy Championship points scoring system stated: 1st 25 points, 2nd 18 points, 3rd 13 points, 4th 12 points, 5th 10 points, 6th 8 points, 7th 6 points, 8th 4 points, 9th 2 points, 10th 1 point and extra feature of a bonus point being scored for every fastest stage time within the class.

The odds were still stacked against Irish driver Breen, as he was required to win the rally and if Kaur were to finish second, Breen would need to win four-fourths of the seventeen stages made up the event.

The final event of the six round WRC Academy series got under way on Thursday afternoon and ended a double

run of the Great Orme tarmac stage in North Wales. The opening day was then completed with the first tarmac to the Welsh forests for the 15.7 km stage of Clogauog.

Breen was pipped on the first stage by Australian Brendan Reeves by 1.1 second but on the tarmac of the last Breen set his first fastest stage time of the weekend taking the overall lead by 2.1 sec.

Then as the cars took on the first gravel test Breen showed a clean pair of heels, extending his advantage to 28.6s. His championship rival Kaur made a slow start and was down in sixth place, 33 seconds as the Academy went for the Thursday overnight halt.

Friday started early with the 19.2 km of Garthreising and Craig was ready for the task setting equal fastest time with Alastair Fisher on the stage four morning opener.

Then over stages 5, 6 and 7, the Waterford man was in a class of his own. On Stage 5, Breen was 3.2sec quicker than by 4.2 from Fisher and their "polished" morning was rounded off on stage 7 when Craig was again 7.5sec ahead of Alastair Fisher who held second place.

After the morning loop, Breen's total of fastest times had mounted to six from seven. Championship leader, Egon Kaur's stage time on Garthreising (SS4) moved him into third place on the rally and the consequence of this was that if Craig was to clinch the title he would need to win the rally and claim 11 stage wins.

The weather deteriorated for the run as the forecasted rain arrived; this did not deter the Irish driver as Breen continued his assault, taking his fifth fastest time of the day and seventh in total on SS4, Dyff West 2.

The academy crews then moved to SS8, Dyff East 2 and yet again Breen persisted with his onslaught of setting fastest stage times, on this one he was 3.4 sec quicker than Tyrone man Alastair Fisher, who was now 30.3 seconds off



Craig exits his Ford Fiesta R2 in service as FIA WRC Champion

Craig's astonishing pace. On the 6.72km stage of the final day he set a third overall 1:56.7 in arrears of the Irish driver.

So on to the penultimate stage of Friday (Garthreising 2) and there was no beating the Irish driver. On the run Craig set 1:27.3 for the 18.72 km's. Fisher came nearest but was still 18.6 away and Egon (Kaur) dropped another 22.7 seconds.

Day Two was completed with the 21.1km of Dyffant 2 and Breen looked to have completed the perfect day with eight fastest stage times when he set 1:32.8. Egon Kaur dropped one minute 46 seconds and Alastair Fisher suffered a puncture. But there was a late twist when Australian driver Mully Taylor recorded her first fastest stage time of the season going 7 of seven faster than Craig.

The drama on the stage had two repercussions, firstly, Kaur was elevated to second overall and with Molly sailing Craig of another fastest stage time, the Irish driver would require five fastest

stage times on the final day. On the 6.72km stage of the inaugural season on the 6.72km stage of Hafren, Sweet Lamb and Myherin, three of the most famous 'special stages' in World Rallying. Craig entered the stage flat on the start order and posted 21:59.5, Kaur began his final day's assault on a charge and took his first fastest time of the weekend.

Breen hit back on the short Sweet Lamb 1 stage (SS3) and then on the final test in the morning loop both Breen and Kaur battled it out with the Irishman taking it by one second. This set up a dramatic final loop of three stages with Breen still requiring all three to tie the championship points table and win the series on count back of fastest stage times throughout the year.

Kaur was off the pace on the finish of Hafren 2 (32.16km) and retired 18.3sec down on Craig who racked up stage win number twelve of the weekend. Number thirteen for Breen quickly followed on the short 4.8m Sweet Lamb 2, SS13 where

the Estonian again lost 13 seconds to Craig.

By virtue of his better overall position Craig entered the stage eleven minutes before his arch rival, Kaur. As Craig negotiated the last 27km of the test it became clear his time would be slower than his earlier run, by the end the Irish driver posted 18:13.6, then, as Craig describes it, "The longest 31 minutes of my life". World Rally media's Colin Clark was on hand and in constant contact with Breen to pass on Kaur's split times as the came through.

Over the early splits the Estonian was just up on Craig but then it began to turn, by split five Craig 36 up and at the final split Craig was 1.3 up. There was a brief fall as Craig and his supporters impatiently wait for Kaur's final time. Then as only Colin Clark can deliver, he announced that Craig had beaten Kaur and clinched victory.

## How the Championship was won

- Round 1:** Vodafone Rally de Portugal 24 - 27 Mar 2011  
**Event Winner:** Egon Kaur, Points Scored: Kaur 28, Breen 5
  - Round 2:** Rally d'Italia Sardegna 05 - 08 May 2011  
**Event Winner:** Egon Kaur, Points Scored: Kaur 30, Breen 8
  - Round 3:** Neste Oil Rally Finland 28 - 30 Jul 2011  
**Event Winner:** Egon Kaur, Points Scored: Kaur 30, Breen 23
  - Round 4:** ADAC Rallye Deutschland 18 - 21 Aug 2011  
**Event Winner:** Craig Breen, Points Scored: Kaur 4, Breen 30
  - Round 5:** Rallye de France Alsace 29 Sep - 02 Oct 2011  
**Event Winner:** Alastair Fisher, Points Scored: Kaur 0, Breen 6
  - Round 6:** Wales Rally GB 10 - 13 Nov 2011  
**Event Winner:** Craig Breen, Points Scored: Kaur 18, Craig 30
- Total Points Scored:** Egon Kaur 111, Craig Breen 111.
- Craig Breen wins the championship on more fastest stage times recorded throughout the year.

## Questions & Answers

**Craig, you're the inaugural FIA WRC Academy Cup champion. How good does it feel?**

"I can't find words to describe this moment. For sure 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. We've finished level on points but we've got it on stage wins so we're absolutely thrilled."

**You had to win all three stages this afternoon to get enough bonus points to take the title. How hard was that?**

"I'd got into quite a good rhythm so I wasn't thinking too much about the stages. I was just trying to be fast and carry good speeds."

**Did you believe you'd leave here with the title?**

"We were 100 per cent committed when we came here. We knew what we had to do and I never lost the faith. I didn't lose it in Portugal, in Sardinia. We kept it going all year and I think belief is the main thing here. I've got a fantastic group of people back in Ireland that follow me and believe in me just about as much as I believe in myself. We left until the last stage of the last rally to get that finally. To do it is just amazing."

**You've not only won the title but you've also claimed the €500,000 scholarship to invest in the next stage of your career. How important is this?**

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

**And what is the plan for 2012?**

"We're going to be at the start line on Rallye Monte-Carlo in the S2000 ready to win. The prize has given me most of next year's budget and I can put my own budget to the following year so it's guaranteed two more years in the sport I love so what better prize could there be."

**And what about your co-driver Gareth Roberts. What role has he played in your success this year?**

"He's kept my feet on the ground this weekend, which is not an easy job. Having to leave service for the last three stages knowing there was no possibility other than to win them all was very difficult. But he's ready to get me on the straight and narrow so it's all credit to him. He's the bestest Welsh wizard but the best of them for sure."



Champion Breen held aloft by Alastair Fisher in third place and Egon Kaur Wales Rally GB.