

BRIAN PATTERSON

“The award is a big stepping stone”



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Breen secured honours at MI Awards last week

Ironically, it was on the same day that the Irish government announced yet another severely austere budget last week that the annual Dunlop Motorsport Ireland Champions of Irish Motorsport Awards Luncheon took place in Dublin's Crowne Plaza Hotel. It is seen as an important and valuable showcase for motorsport in Ireland.

In world terms, the Emerald Isle is a tiny place with just over 4000 Motorsport Ireland competition licence holders. But despite being small, Ireland has a rich motorsport heritage and against that backdrop the announcement of the winner of one of the world's richest and most prestigious young driver schemes, the 50,000 euro (£42,500) Billy Coleman Award, is always eagerly anticipated.

The last two winners, Craig Breen and Robert Barrable, were at the lunch – indeed Breen picked up another award while there, the David Manley Trophy for International Driver of the Year. Breen has been backed every inch of the way since he cut his teeth in karting by his father, industrialist and former National champion Ray, as well as his mother Jackie.

With his ability and determination however, Craig was certain to reach the top in motorsport, no matter what. However the efforts of Motorsport Ireland and the Irish Sports Council should not be underestimated. The Billy Coleman Award, as well as his MI nomination to the Pirelli Star Driver Shootout and the WRC Academy, were stepping stones on the phenomenally successful path that took Craig to the FIA prize-giving in Delhi last week.

This year's Coleman award winner, 22-year-old Sam Moffett from Clontibret in County Monaghan, won Group N on the Dunlop National Championship, and just missed out on the same category on the Tarmac series. He plans to put that right next season, build up further experience on events abroad and then follow Breen's footsteps in the WRC Academy in 2013.

It is being mooted that the immensely respected Tom Walsh will act as mentor from now on for the Billy Coleman Award winners. Walsh co-ordinated for Coleman in his British Championship-winning days and was also clerk of the course of Rally Ireland. He has given many young drivers the benefit of his wisdom.

Robert Barrable, who won the Coleman Award last year and received assistance from Skoda Ireland this season, plans to tackle the WRC Academy in 2012, while Alastair Fisher and Elfyn Evans are two more heading for the Academy.