

# Breen hoping for big performance in Portugal

BY TREVOR McGRATH

After a six week break in the World Rally Championship Craig Breen has a hectic two event schedule over the next two weeks. First up next weekend is round three of the Super 2000 World Rally Championship in Portugal and then the following weekend Craig returns home to Ireland for his eagerly awaited maiden outing with the Santeloc Junior Rally team, in the Peugeot 207 S2000.

First up comes World Rally Portugal which forms round three of the Super 2000 World Rally Championship (SWRC). Craig has made an impressive start to his campaign, winning the opening round in Monte Carlo and taking second in February as the championship headed to Sweden. The Waterford drivers reward for his early season dominance is an 18 point lead in the series.

The Super 2000 World Rally Championship has tasted the Tarmac of France and the snow in Sweden already this year and next weekend the series moves to gravel first time for round three in Portugal.

The one common denominator over those first two rallies, has been Swedish driver P-G Andersson (Proton Motorsport) hitting the front on both. On the Monte it ended prematurely for the Swede on the penulti-

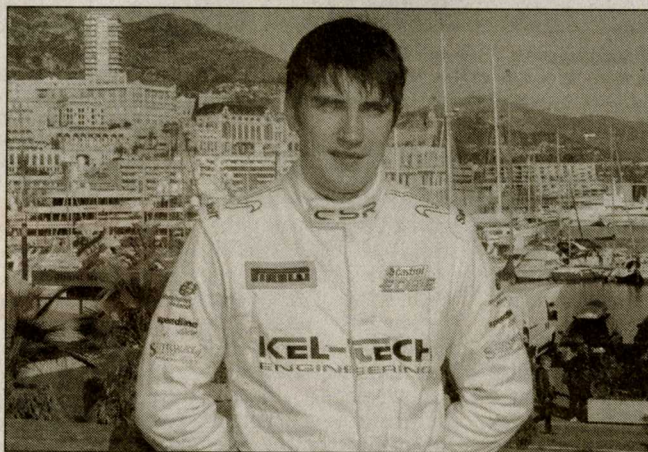
mate evening but on home ground in Sweden he took a convincing win.

Over the opening two rallies Craig has taken a mature approach. Driving with a controlled pace and this decision has rewarded the WRC Academy Champion well as he leads the series by 18 points.

The pattern from the Monte and Sweden is set to be broken next weekend as Proton Motorsport have nominated SWRC Portugal as their round to drop. This will leave the door open for Breen to extend his advantage but this is easier said than done.

The Portuguese event will effectively mark the halfway point in the SWRC season for Craig. Breen has nominated round 4 in New Zealand as his dropped rally from the 8 round series. "Portugal is the first gravel event of the year it's vital that I keep the run going," said Breen before leaving for the Algarve. "Our win on the Monte was an incredible start and with P-G on home ground for round two we were really fighting for second place. I haven't changed my driving style this year but I do think I'm maturing as a driver. The Monte was a big learning curve and I'm delighted with my early season start."

World Rally Portugal has been a destination of mixed fortunes for Craig over his last two visits. In 2009 Breen took part in the Algarve event



Craig Breen has a busy few weeks coming up in Portugal and Armagh.

competing in the opening round of the FSTi and on his maiden WRC rally the then 19 year-old took top honours. Last season however on the opening round of the WRC Academy Breen gave a dominating performance but was thwarted near the end when he got caught out, going off the road on the final day and out of the rally. Now with a clean slate the academy champion has a great opportunity to extend his advantage at the top of the SWRC standings.

Craig's biggest challenge apart from the gruelling gravel stages is expected to come from New Zealand-

der, Hayden Paddon. The current production car world rally champion didn't appear at the Monte and after finishing fourth in Sweden; the Kiwi trails the Tel-Tech Engineering Ford Fiesta driver by 31 points and will be going all out for a top finish in the Algarve.

"Portugal is going to be very important, I decided at the start of the year to not travel to round four in New Zealand so Portugal is the halfway stage for me.", said the category leader, "It's the first gravel event of the year and is always a tough event. The introduction of the night stages will be

interesting. I got the chance to test at home on a local gravel event at the beginning of the month which included stages in darkness. Last weekend I was also in Turkey for a gravel test with Castrol Ford Team Turkey so I'm well prepared.

In early March, Craig Breen Rallying in collaboration with Sainteloc Racing released news that Craig would be joining the French team for four outings in the IRC under the newly launched 'Sainteloc Junior Rally Team' with backing from Peugeot Sport and consisting of a two car (Peugeot 207 S2000) team, with Craig and French driver Mathieu Arzeno. "Yeah, this season is starting to look very exciting now", said Craig, "I will continue my assault on the SWRC and that will remain my priority but the opportunity has come up to drive a Peugeot 207 S2000 in the IRC and I can't wait.

"Winning the WRC Academy has opened some important doors for me, one of which was Peugeot Sport. After being approached by the manufacture at the end of last year, they expressed an interest for me to use a 207 S2000 in the SWRC. We remained in close contact after I decided to stick with my Fiesta and over the last few months Peugeot Sport, together with Sainteloc Racing have offered me this new deal. It will be a totally new adventure

in a different car, working with a new team and working with a team mate. I tested the car during the last week and I'm very excited about work with the team on the upcoming IRC events but for now I must put this to one side and concentrate on Portugal."

Less than a week after Rally Portugal, Craig will be back in Ireland to begin his exploits in the Peugeot 207 as part of the Sainteloc Junior Rally Team on the iconic 'Circuit of Ireland rally'. The event this year forms round three of the IRC (Intercontinental Rally Challenge) and takes place on Friday and Saturday, the 6th and 7th April. 16 challenging tarmac stages in Counties Antrim, Down, Armagh, Tyrone and a short section in the Republic, with the Rally HQ based in Armagh City Hotel. The highlights however will be a spectacular 'Superspecial' stage to kick the rally off being held on Friday evening in the Titanic Quarter, Belfast City and is followed on Saturday with the Lisburn 'Power-Stage' which will be run twice.

Craig is looking forward to the Circuit for more than one reason, "This year marks 20 years since my rallying hero Frank Meagher won the event. It also marks the 10th anniversary since his tragic death. The rally will be my first driving for Peugeot and Sainteloc Racing but it will also be very special as I remember my hero."