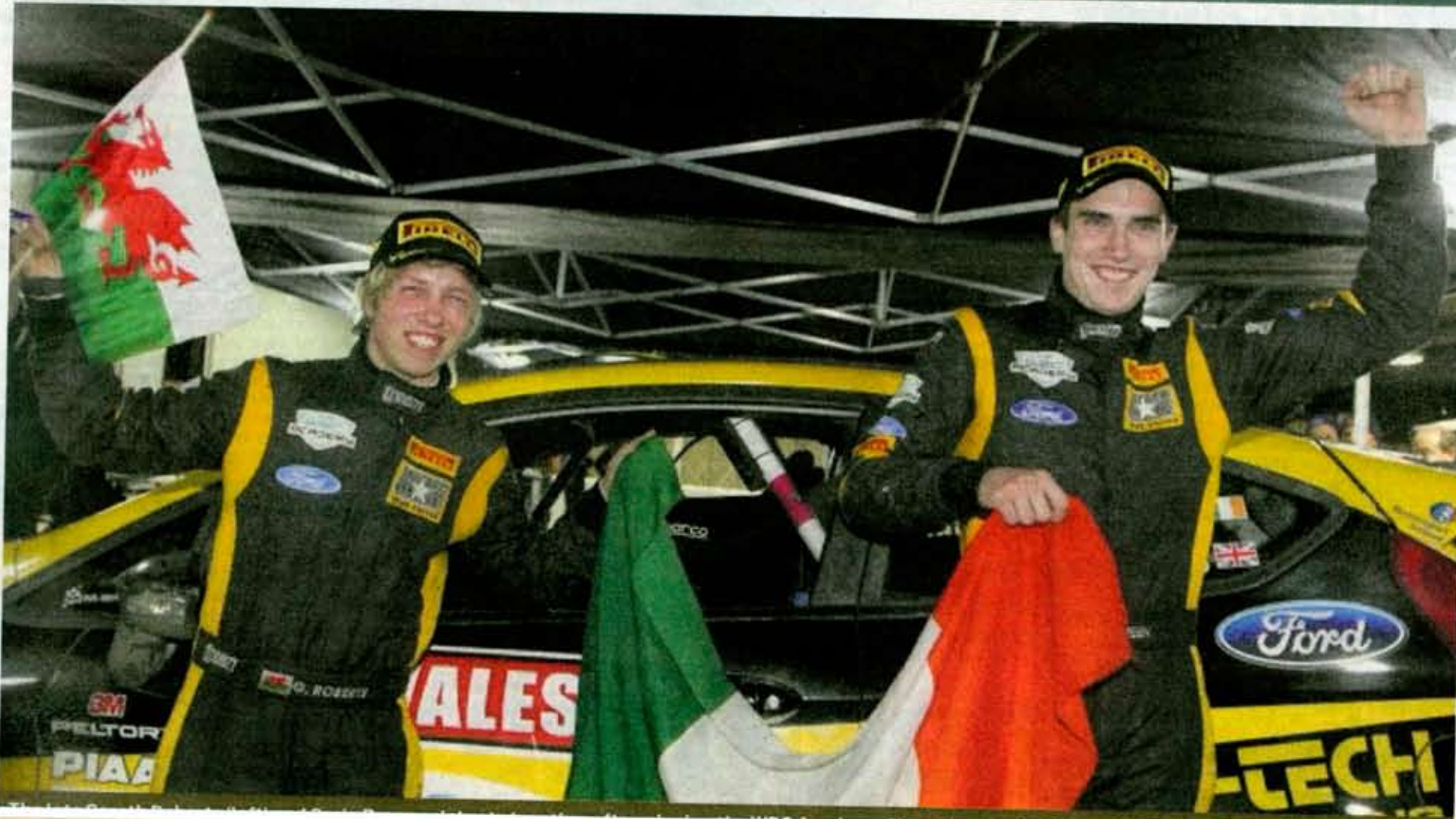


VINCENT HOGAN ON SATURDAY

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Knockout blow for Ward unfair

THERE'S been something utterly demoralising about the story of Joe Ward, the London Olympics and officialdom speaking out of both sides of the mouth.

The proportion of Turkish success at the final qualifying tournament in Trabzon pretty much dragged the sport into disrepute. But Ward, as one of the more conspicuous victims, clung to the hope of a 'wild card' invitation from the IOC Tripartite Committee.

This did not materialise this week. Why? Apparently on the basis of him not being the highest ranked European light-heavyweight boxer to be missing from the Olympic entry. Just one problem.

Ward is reigning European champion and ranked No 5 in

Sometimes there is no 'why' in sport's relationship with danger

WHAT is it?" Marian Finucane gasped with audible incredulity, digesting last Saturday morning's wretched news from Sicily.

John Kenny had stepped into studio with news of another rally death. Gareth Roberts, the young Welsh co-driver of Waterford's Craig Breen, was gone. The very thought of it caught like a fishhook in the senses.

Another sad little plume of flowers, fluttering by a roadside in memory of someone taken from this life by sport. Finucane's tone of disbelief undoubtedly reflected a broad consensus.

"And you just stand there on the side of the road, watching cars whizz by?" she asked, bewildered.

Kenny confirmed that, yes, that's pretty much what rally enthusiasts did, pointing out that, even as he spoke, there were maybe 70,000 such eccentrics lining ditches in Donegal.

Coming just weeks after the deaths of Joe Lane and Caroline Cleary in Cavan, it seemed neither unwise or unkind to be asking uncomfortable questions of rallying.

Death in competition can never be passed off as any kind of acceptable collateral damage, no

matter the prior acceptance of danger.

And every ounce of the Roberts and, indeed, Breen families today will probably ache with a terrible confusion over how to reconcile what happened last Saturday morning with any sustainable concept of sport.

I never met Gareth Roberts, but he was, clearly, an exceptionally talented co-driver whose gifts were critical to Breen's spectacular rise to within touching distance of a World Championship drive.

They were contesting a round of the Intercontinental Rally Challenge last weekend when their Peugeot crashed at high speed, a guard-rail tragically piercing the cockpit.

Remarkably, the official IRC website posted a disturbing 90-second video of people surrounding the damaged car, waving frantically to an overhead helicopter for assistance, even after confirmation that there had been a fatality. The video was eventually taken down in mid-afternoon, presumably after a torrent of complaints.

Breen, naturally, spent the past week in a state of shock and deep distress. A few fond photographs of Roberts were posted on his Twitter account and he tweeted the brutally stark sentence: "I have lost half of me".

Whether or not he ever rallies

again is immaterial now. The bond of trust between driver and co-driver at the highest competitive level must be so absolute, so inviolable, there's a high likelihood that what Breen had with Roberts could never be replaced. Indeed, there is a higher likelihood still that, for Craig Breen, the appetite may never be there to even try.

To the outside community, Roberts' death will resonate with the same, distant moral questioning you could hear in Finucane's voice. In other words, if a sport is - potentially - lethal, why do it?

Recently, I watched a wonderful documentary on Philippe Petit's celebrated high-wire walk between the Twin Towers in 1974.

It followed the Frenchman through months of meticulous

planning and carried extraordinary footage of the walk itself (in a 45-minute game of chase with the police, he lay down eight times on the wire).

Physical fear had been so far removed from Petit's mindset that he reckoned the most dangerous part of the adventure was being thrown down a staircase afterwards by the angry authorities.

"I did something magnificent and mysterious and they were asking why," said Petit. "I didn't have a why."

Different people have different relationships with danger. In a perfect world, sport would probably never explore those relationships.

But ask yourself would Ruby Walsh or Tony McCoy prefer to live in that perfect world? Would the people who climb into boxing rings, climb mountains, sail oceans, power motorbikes down country lanes prefer it?

About 18 months ago, I travelled to a snowbound Cumbria to interview Breen about an upcoming season in which he would be crowned World Rally Championship Academy champion. He talked of a childhood spent supporting his dad, Ray, who himself was crowned Irish national champion in 2005.

Craig recalled that he went to "every single rally" over the 10 years it took his dad to win that Championship.

On occasion, he navigated for his dad too, thereby acquiring an understanding of the sport from what is euphemistically called the "hot-seat."

I remember asking Craig if he had an interest in any other sports. "Absolutely none," he answered unequivocally. "If there was a World Cup on outside the door there, I'd turn my back on it!"

It was an answer that didn't surprise me, because rallying people are a lot like racing people. They don't simply follow a sport; they allow their lives to become consumed by it.

Maybe six months before we met, one of Craig's best friends, Thomas Maguire, was killed while co-driving in the Donegal International. Ten years ago, his childhood hero, Frank Meagher, died in a testing accident.

No sport that demands its participants' blood groups be printed on the side of the car fools anyone into believing that tragedy can't come calling.

And Craig certainly wasn't fooled. But Gareth Roberts died doing something he excelled at, something he adored. If he was remotely reckless or cavalier about life, he'd never have made it as a professional.

In death, he deserves the basic respect of that fact being remembered. Horrific as these hours must be for those he left behind.

Unique offer now off the table...
DESPITE popular demand, this column is **NOT** repeating its kind offer in the event of an unlikely Irish victory over the All Blacks this morning. Blame it on the inclement weather.