

Heartbreak for Breen on WRC France

■ Trevor McGrath

Craig Breen won't give up on winning the inaugural WRC Academy Cup despite missing out on a gilt-edged opportunity to close the gap to title leader Egon Kaur on Rallye de France Alsace. "It's going to be a tall order to win the title now but there are 18 stages on Rally GB and 18 points up for grabs in addition to the 25 we could get for winning so we'll be giving it our all," Breen told WRC.com.

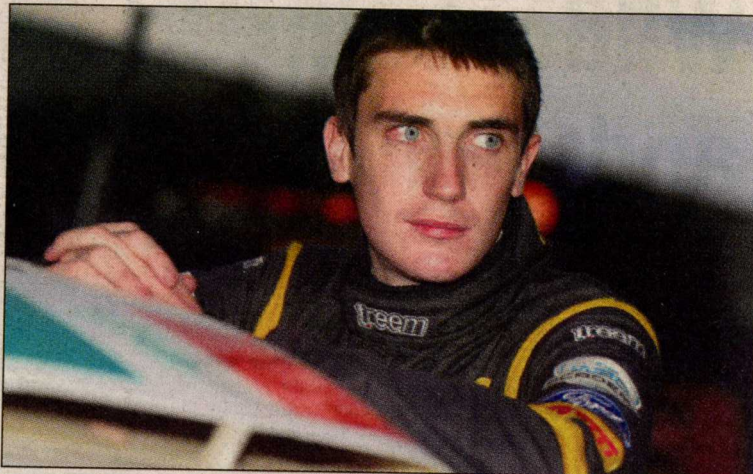
"It's disappointing that we're out but, not wishing to sound cocky, I've proved I'm the fastest driver here in France and I hope to get the recognition for that."

With Kaur retiring on Friday morning, Irishman Breen was well placed to cut his Estonian rival's advantage. Breen, who took his first win on the previous round in Germany, held an overnight lead of 24 seconds after setting the pace on day-one.

The Irish driver lost seven seconds to Spain's Yeray Lemes as the rally resumed on Saturday morning on special stage nine. The pair were neck and neck on the splits through stage ten when Breen crashed out one kilometre from the end. Breen, who is part of the Pirelli Star Driver programme, explained his off was the result of a pace note error: "I've made a hell of a lot of mistakes in my career but this time Gareth Roberts was a wee bit late with the note for a slow left corner. We went into a bank and broke the driveshaft."

Breen made a cautious start on Friday morning as round five of the season got underway recording ninth fastest time, 9.8 seconds down on Spanish driver Yeray Lemes.

The Irish driver however hit back over stages two and three and four to set fastest stage times to overhaul his Spanish rival and take a 26.3 sec lead into midday service. Breen's morning's work was further enhanced with the news that championship leader Egon Kaur crashing out on stage three, handing a tremendous opportunity to close the gap to his rival with one round remaining.



Craig Breen in pensive mood before Rally Scotland.

In the Friday midday service Craig said, "It's a shame what happened to Egon, we were in exactly the same position in Sardinia earlier this season, we retired early on the Friday so we have to keep in mind that anything can happen. We are keeping a quite steady pace and not pushing overly hard."

The Waterford driver continued to set the pace as the afternoon action resumed with stage five, Breen again topped the times extending his lead to 31.8

He was temporary slowed on stage six when his Fiesta R2 sustained a puncture, six Kilometres from the end. Lemes took advantage of Breen's bad luck, cutting the Irish driver's lead to 18.2sec.

With the ailing tyre changed Breen finished the day racking up another two fastest times to round off an exemplary performance and held a 24.6 sec lead as the crews reached the Friday overnight halt.

The action resumed on Saturday with Spaniard, Lemes setting the pace on stage nine, cutting Craig's advantage to 17sec. The pair were neck and neck on the splits throughout stage ten but when Breen's final split was slow in registering the team back at base knew something was wrong. The word then came through

that he and Gareth had gone off and were out.

Before the French event Craig trailed Estonian driver Egon Kaur by 26 points. The Irish driver picks up six championship points for his six fastest stage times from Friday's action. Kaur crashed out early but was able to resume on Saturday under SupeRally. The Estonian suffered more trouble during day two and failed to finish. The gap going into the final event of the season now stands at 20 points, Kaur leading the way on 92 and Craig now up to 72 points. The FIA WRC Academy comes to a climax in November [10th -13th] with Wales Rally Great Britain.

Craig and Gareth will have the opportunity to put their bad luck behind them next weekend when they take on IRC Rally Scotland. It's Craig's second IRC event in quick succession after his unbelievable seventh overall at the Barum Czech Rally Zlin. The Waterford driver will again campaign his Kel-Tech Engineering Ford Fiesta S2000 with the three day event starting on Friday. The Rally is based in the City Perth, featuring a ceremonial start at Stirling Castle on Friday afternoon.