

Poignant triumph for Breen at Wales Rally GB

BY TREVOR MCGRATH

Craig Breen has moved back into FIA Super 2000 World Rally Championship title contention by becoming the third driver to win two rounds of this year's series following his dominant category victory on Wales Rally GB today. The result, Breen's first in the series since he and former co-driver Gareth Roberts triumphed on Rallye Monte-Carlo in January, puts the Irishman into joint second place in the title chase, eight points behind leader P-G Andersson.

Breen's victory prompted an outpouring of emotion at the finish of the final stage as he remembered Welshman Roberts, who lost his life competing on a rally in Sicily three months ago having partnered Breen to the inaugural FIA WRC Academy title in Wales last season. "We did the job here last year and we've done it again this year," said Breen. "Everything was perfect and I couldn't ask for more. But I miss Gareth so much and I wish he could have been here."

The Irish driver began the gravel rally in based in Wales on the back of a penultimate stage exit on his last outing on World Rally Finland, placed fourth in the SWRC (FIA Super 2000 World Rally Championship) standings, twenty five points off championship leader P-G Andersson. But Wales Rally GB has always been kind to the Waterford man having clenched the Fiesta Sport Trophy International in 2009 and the FIA WRC Academy title last year on the same event.

Craig, partnered by Killarney man, Paul Nagle got off to the perfect start when on stage two they set their first fastest stage time within the SWRC class, taking over the category lead. Their position was further enhanced when title rival Hayden Paddon hit trouble with an ignition problem dropping twelve minutes. This was quickly followed by more good fortune for the Irish crew when championship leader P-G Andersson retired for the day after ripping a wheel off his Proton. Breen driving the Kel-Tech Engineering Ford Fiesta S2000 went on to record five fastest stage times within the class to lead Yazeed Al Rajhi (Saudi Arabia) by 1 minute 14 seconds at the end of day one.

On Friday evening, Craig said, "It's been a great day and to hold a lead of over a minute takes a lot of pressure off. We started cautiously on the first test this morning but from then on we set five fastest stage times. Looking to the

Craig Breen on route to victory in Wales.



championship it's been very interesting; Hayden (Paddon) and PG (Andersson) have had problems, so I'm now in a position that I can pace myself tomorrow."

Day Two Saturday consisted of seven stages and by the end of the day Breen remained in total control with a lead of 2 minutes 15 seconds over Briton, Tom Cave. This however does not reveal the cut and thrust of the day's action. Breen retained his comfortable advantage over the morning loop of stages but an oil leak forced a gearbox change at midday service and resulted in the Irishman incurring 1 min 20 sec of time penalties after a powersteering pipe leak was also discovered causing the Fiesta crew to leave service late. "The gearbox change went perfectly but when the guys put the 'box back in they noticed one of the powersteering pipes was damaged so it all had to come back out again," explained Breen. "They had the gearbox change done in 22 minutes, which was really impressive because it normally takes 26 but the extra repairs put us over the time limit."

Incurring the time penalty dropped Breen back to the second position in the class, twelve seconds behind Al Rajhi. Over the afternoon loop there was a see-saw battle between the two Fiesta drivers. Breen drew first blood by taking back the lead on stage ten but the Saudi driver hit back on SS11 recording his first fastest stage time of the weekend to move to top spot. On the penultimate stage of the day, Craig

turned the tables to go 6s faster and 2.9 sec in front yet again. On a better tyre option Al Rajhi looked to have had the final Saturday say when he went in front by 0.1 on the 'Celtic Manor' super-special but there was one extra twist. On the liaison section back to final service Al-Rajhi committed a speeding offence resulting in event officials imposing a five-minute time penalty for the offence dropping him down to third overall.

Instead of waking to begin a final day battle for victory Breen awoke now with a 2 minute 15 second advantage over Proton driver Tom Cave. Taking no risks over the morning stages Craig extended the lead to 2 min 23 sec by midday service. There were no heroics over the closing stages for Craig and when he reached the end of the final stage the emotions got the better of the twenty two year old, "I couldn't have asked for anything better. This is where I met my best friend, where we always did best and I'm so glad we've done it this weekend."

The win puts Breen's championship aspirations back on track as he moves to joint 2nd (68 points), level with New Zealander Haydon Paddon. PG Andersson (Sweden) continues to lead after picking up 8 points over weekend and is now topping the table with 78.

The Super 2000 championship now moves to tarmac for the final two rounds of the season, World Rally France next month and World Rally Spain in November.