

■ Trevor McGrath

IRISH Rally driver, Craig Breen clinched the SWRC (Super 2000 World Rally Championship) in heroic style on the final day of World Rally Spain last weekend. In doing so Breen secures consecutive world rally titles after winning the inaugural FIA WRC Academy Championship twelve months ago. The 22 year old suffered the severest blow of his career in June when his best friend and former co-driver, Gareth Roberts, was killed in an accident on IRC Rally, Targa Florio.

The Waterford driver made a comeback on World Rally Finland in August and on the closing three SWRC rounds (Wales Rally GB, World Rally France and World Rally Spain) of the season stamped his authority on the championship claiming a hat trick of wins.

He also completed World Rally Spain in sixth overall, equalling Sebastien Ogier's record of the highest overall finish of an S2000 car in the 2012 World Rally Championship.

After taking a commanding advantage on day one which saw the Ford driver hold an overnight lead of 3 minutes 41 seconds, Breen adopted a marking tactic over the Saturday and Sunday stages. Controlling from the front, the Irish driver kept his arch rival, Swede, P-G Andersson at arm's length covering every attack while preserving his car all the way through to a flourishing finish. At the conclusion of the eighteenth and final stage, a euphoric Breen was overcome with joy for winning the title but also reflected on the huge loss during the summer, "Incredible, I can't believe it, you know I've had questions about if I'm making the correct decision. But for reasons I can't explain I wanted to get back in a rally car immediately, and I think this confirms it all. You know, we were meant to be here, we were meant to win this title and I'm so happy to have pulled it off."

The final round in the 2012 World Rally Championship was played out around the holiday resort of Salou, on Spain's Costa Brava. The season ending event held an extra twist being

the only dual surface rally of gravel (day one) and asphalt (Day two & three) as the Super 2000 World Rally Championship went all the way to the wire.

The finale to the SWRC category had a three way battle forecast between championship leader, Craig Breen (93 points) from Ireland, P-G Andersson (91 points) from Sweden and Yazeed Al Rajhi (73 points) from Saudi Arabia.



Jumping for joy in Salou

The opening day of World Rally Spain was based on gravel with six stages but the rain made the surface conditions treacherous. Initially in

the morning Andersson set the pace opening a gap of 16 seconds over Craig by the end of stage two. The highlight of the first day in Salou was the 44 km's of the Terra Alta special stage. The first major incident of the weekend happened early on the first run when Andersson's Proton broke a driveshaft. By the end of the stage the Swede's lead had vanished as Breen turned a sixteen second deficit into a 1 minute 9 second lead.

In the afternoon as the action resumed with stage 4, Andersson cut Craig's lead to 55 seconds but again the rerun of Terra Alta would define the rally. Early in the test the Proton driver hit a bank damaging his steering. Breen at the wheel of his Ford Fiesta S2000 on the other hand had a perfect drive and by the end of day held an advantage of 3m41.5s.

World Rally Spain is the only dual surface event within the World Rally Championship and for day two the event reverted to tarmac. With a commanding lead, Craig adopted a covering approach to each of the day's six stages, keeping one eye on the road

ahead and the other on Andersson's stage times. A trouble free run helped the former WRC Academy Champion to a controlled drive and by Saturday evening his lead was 3 minutes 19 seconds.

The 18 stage rally rounded off with another six stages on Sunday. Breen resumed his ULTRA cautious drive over the morning loop by dropping 37 seconds as he continued his precautionary surge to the finish line. Reaching midday service his lead stood at 2 min 42 sec but with only 46 km's the end was in sight.

Over those closing three stages Andersson continued to narrow the gap as Breen slowed to all but a crawl. But the Irish driver's happiness and relief bubbled to the surface as he reached the end of the final stage, when he knew he had clinched the championship, "I really couldn't have done this without everybody's support and good wishes so I'd like to take this moment to thank each and everyone of you. It's the perfect attribute to Gareth too and I am so happy to have won this title for him."