

Breen red-hot in freezing Swedish temperatures

"I'm over the moon and learning with every Kilometre" was the comment from Craig Breen after yet another accomplished performance from the Irish driver on his first Snow Event in the World Championship. 15th overall, third in the S2000 class and shades of his result on Rally Great Britain, where he suffered early problems. But showing maturity beyond his years, Breen keeps raising the bar with every appearance.

The action started on the Färjestad Trotting course in Karlstad with the Thursday evening Super Special. Falling snow made conditions tricky over the 1.9 Km stage but Craig got his new year off to the perfect start, setting the pace in the S2000 class and held 12th overall in the main field. The real work began on Friday with the first full day in the new season taking in 128.42 Kilometres. Conditions were made even more difficult as an overnight snowfall had covered the stages. It was a baptism of fire as the rally opened with the famous 24 Kms of Vargasen, which contained the renowned "Colin's Crest". The drama for Craig was not at the notorious jump but when he was held up by another competitor who had crashed. The consequence was that the Keltech Fiesta dropped over six minutes and as Craig entered stage three he found himself down in 36th position. This



was not the first time for the young driver to suffer bad luck so early on a WRC event. Just four months ago in November on Rally GB the Pirelli Star Driver was hit by a second stage puncture dropping him down the field. Having gained valuable experience on that occasion, Craig quickly got back to work on SS 3 and the second stage setback was put completely behind him on stage four when he recorded the 7th quickest time. Over the afternoons stages Breen began to climb the leader board. On stage 5, he was up to 25th, he

consolidated that position on stage 6 and as the day drew to a close on stage seven Craig had gained three more places and held 22nd over night.

Saturday is usually the toughest day of a WRC event and this year's season opener was no exception. Day two took in a total of nine stages, which included a repeated loop of four tests and then the day was rounded off with the second run over the Karlstad super special. Craig, under instructions from mentor Mike Broad to drive at a control pace, steadily entered the top twenty over the morning

loop. At the midday service in Hagfors, Broad was again on hand to offer advice to his young student, who was like a sponge soaking up knowledge. As Craig took the start line on Saturday evening in Karlstad he was back up to 15th overall and 3rd in S2000.

Sunday morning the run to the finish and the twenty one year olds learning curve continued. On the morning's opening stage (SS17 Torntorp 1) there was a mix up with the timing and Craig was directed to start the stage one minute behind Dutchman

René Kuipers, instead of the standard two minute interval. As a result Craig caught Kuipers within the first 5 Kms and was held up by the slower driver. He was disappointed at the end of the test but the incident emphasized how important total concentration is required. Stage eighteen was the short four kms of Gustavsfors and Craig had settled, matching the stage time of his fellow S2000 class rivals Martin Prokop and Patrick Sandell. The final service in Hagfors and Craig reported that his only concern was the rear differential, "As I take off from the start line it takes a few seconds for the car to engage the diff, I think I've worn out the plates out using the handbrake a bit to much. It's a case of bringing it home now in one piece over the remaining three stages".

The layout of the final three stages was altered to facilitate the live TV broadcast of SS 22 Gustavsfors 2 (Power Stage). Torntorp at 19.21 kms again was first up but this time around the 22.76 km of was next Rammen. The climax then came with the 4.16 of Gustavsfors. Craig stayed steadfast and conserved his position over both Torntorp and Rammen, there was one moment on Gustavsfors where he hit a snow bank but as I brought the car to a stop at the finish of the stage and the rally he was overjoyed by overall drive. .