



Breen's Swede Dreams

Craig Breen raised his game to new levels with a stunning drive to 15th place on Rally Sweden. And it would have been even better but for an incident beyond his control which cost him over five minutes and at least three places on the leaderboard.

It came on the second stage where his S2000 Ford Fiesta was blocked by a crashed car, the delay preventing Breen from challenging for the lead in the SWRC category. Still, third place behind such experienced drivers as Patrik Sandell and former Junior World champion Martin Prokop was highly creditable.

And boy did he enjoy it! "The most fun I've had with my clothes on," he said at one point. "The stages are fantastic, a real joy to drive. I'm just over the moon."

It was Breen's first snow rally and no doubt he benefited from arriving at Karlstad directly from John Haugland's ice driving school in Norway.

The action started with the superspecial on the Färjestad trotting course and although falling snow made conditions tricky, Craig and co-driver Gareth Roberts got their new year off to the perfect start, setting the pace in the S2000 class and with 12th fastest time.

Overnight snow added to the difficulties as the rally proper began with the famous 24 kms of Vargasen, which contained the renowned "Colin's Crest". But the drama for Craig was not at the notorious jump but when he was held up by another competitor who had crashed. Close to six minutes were lost and from 12th Breen plummeted to 36th and then lost a further 20 seconds when he hit a snowbank on stage three.

Why he and other drivers weren't given an allowance or notional time for stage two was never made clear.

But Breen responded superbly with seventh fastest time overall on stage four and through the afternoon stages he began to climb the leader board. On stage five, he was up to 25th, consolidated that position on stage six and as the day drew to a close on stage seven, Breen gained three more places and held 22nd overnight.

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 controlled pace, steadily entered the top 20 over the morning loop. As Craig took the start line on Saturday evening in Karlstad he was back up to 15th overall and 3rd in S2000.

On Sunday morning's opening stage there was a mix up with the timing and Breen was directed to start the stage one minute behind Dutchman René Kuipers, instead of the standard two minute interval. As a result he caught Kuipers within the first five km and was held up, dropping at least 20 seconds.

It pretty much ended his chase after American Ken Block and his WRC Fiesta and Breen, with his own car showing signs of wear on the rear differential, settled for 15th place although he matched both Sandell and Prokop over the final stage.

But it was an outstanding performance from the 21-year-old Rally NI winner from Waterford, highlighted by his seventh fastest time on stage four.

The blockage on stage two cost him dearly. He was classified 38th on that stage, the only time he was outside the top 17, and for most of the rest he averaged 13th fastest.

No wonder he was "over the moon".

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