

Brilliant Breen wins on World stage



Craig Breen in action in Portugal.

IRISH rallying has a new hero, after Craig Breen won the opening round of the Ford Fiesta Sporting Trophy International in Portugal (4/5 April).

The Kilmurry teenager crowned a brilliant debut in Europe with a dominant performance from the start.

Fresh from taking second place in the Bulldog Rally the previous weekend, Craig and his team travelled to Vilamoura on the Algarve coast to join the support bill for the Portuguese round of the World Rally Championship (WRC).

After two days of thorough preparation, he and his co-driver, Gareth Roberts took to the shakedown stage and instantly set the pace. 19 year-old Craig said, "We were fastest in our class, and by a considerable margin."

Buoyed by this, the crew then entertained a packed Algarve Stadium in a Special Stage that paired two cars to directly compete against each other, and the clock. Going head to head with the man he'd beaten in the first stage - the German Patrick Anglade - Breen snatched victory by the width of a match, just 0.9 of a second and aptly described the experience as "like being side by side in a Scalextric race."

The following day, the rally returned to the more 'traditional' mixture of tricky road conditions and exuberant spectators. In each of the three stages, it was Craig's name

topping the timesheets - and at this point he had built a one minute lead over his nearest rival. Saturday proved to be "a lot trickier" as Craig candidly explains - "The slow uphill sections didn't suit the Fiesta, and in the evening we had our first problem. On the last stage of the day, we got a puncture about 9km from the end the stage."

However, it was time that he could afford to lose, having extended the gap to more than five minutes.

Deciding to protect their lead, Craig and Gareth opted to not make any unnecessary risks - but still managed to extend their advantage and move from 32nd overall up to 25th. Using the same tactic in the successive stage again worked.

Returning to the Algarve Stadium for the finale, Craig again found himself paired against Anglade - and again emerged out of the dust, and into the flashbulbs, victorious.

"Once the dust had settled, we also found out that we'd won The N3 and Fiesta Sporting Trophy classes and finished 25th overall - equaling the record for this type of car in a WRC event." He added, "We're over the moon. We just missed out on winning our class in the Bulldog last week, so to come here, onto the World Championship scene and win on our international debut is a dream come true," said Craig.

To follow his fortunes, visit www.craigbreen.com.