

His was supposed to be a learning year for Craig Breen.

It was supposed to be a year where the 19-year-old Irish karting champion would make the full-time transition to rallying. It was a year to learn the ropes and skills, ahead of a full assault on the Fiesta Trophy UK and Ireland titles.

Breen is a fast learner – and a faster driver. By the end of the season, the 19-year-old had achieved incredible things for an inexperienced rookie.

His first rally as a driver: the Rally of Tipperary in August 2007, netted third in class in a rented Honda Civic. The following season started with a few rallies in the Irish Forestry Championship, albeit as co-driver for his father Ray. He then switched to driving in a rented Citroën

It was Breen's debut in a Ford Fiesta ST on the Fastnet Rally in Cork in October 2008 when he started to attract attention. He followed former Junior world champion Aaron Sledge to the event in the R2, who was using the event as a test for the new Fiesta ST. Breen was not able to get the kart as sideways as I wanted to.

His remarkable transition from karting to rallying surprised many – including himself.

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"I went to Galway in February [for the Sport Trophy Ireland opener] hoping for a top-five result in the Fiestas and did not expect a class win," he says. In fact, Breen finished tenth overall on the event, the opening round of the Irish Tar mac Championship. "Then I went to Britain and I was expecting to struggle on the [UK season-opening] Malcolms Wilson Rally. It was Kris Hall's home rally but I was fastest on a couple of stages before we went out with a broken driveshaft. The whole season became a somersault after that."

Breen's ability to make such an impact in his first full season might suggest that his karting experience has helped. But he says the different skill-sets of the two disciplines means that isn't wholly the case.

"I can't find any comparison with the karting," he says. "I don't know what has helped and what has not. I did a few rallies as a navigator with my dad and it was a great buzz. I liked the people there and I am more interested in rallying."

"At European level kart events I went really well in the wet. It is probably one of the reasons I am good at rallying – I thrive in the wet and used to get the kart sideways. Nobody else would try to get the kart sideways. On a dry track I needed to be inch-perfect smooth and I was not able to get the kart as sideways as I wanted to."

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one of the keys to his season: For a 19-year-old, Breen has plenty of prior experience of making and understanding notes through helping out his father Ray.

"I started doing gravel notes for my dad back in 2004 when I was 14. It used to depend on my karting but I loved doing it," says Breen. "When I was younger I had no other way of getting to a rally unless I sat in the back of the recce car so I was learning pace notes while I was growing up."

Breen cites Jean Ragnotti as one of his heroes, and has spent hours studying video footage of the French legend driving a Renault Clio. This, he believes, helped him when he made the switch from the Fiesta ST to the new, more powerful R2 version in July.

"Jean used to drive the car on the handbrake," says Breen. "His footwork was impressive but he was always working the gear lever and the handbrake. It was jaw-dropping and it worked for him. The handbrake did not really work in the ST Fiesta but the R2 car has a proper stand-up handbrake that locks the rear wheels."

"I realised on Rally Spain that if I did not use the handbrake I would be left behind. I had to learn to drive like Ragnotti did."

That trip to Rally Spain in October demonstrated another side to Breen: he's just as good at striking a deal as he is at driving. His prize for winning the Irish Fiesta title was a free run on the Condroz Rally in Belgium; his prize for winning the British series was a free entry on the Rally of Scotland. But he negotiated a deal with M-Sport where the two free entries were combined and swapped for an outing in Spain in an R2, his third WRC event. This gave him a chance of winning the

International title – but it didn't all go to plan. Breen now rates Spain as both his high and low point of the season.

"Each event I do I check the entry list and see what I can find out about the competition," says Breen. "[Greek driver] Lambros Athanassoulas was entered for Spain. I knew he had done the rally before and knew the stages well. I was able to keep up with him and beat him on some stages before an accident put me out of contention."

"I really thought I had thrown the whole championship away. It was silly to go racing against him. It was his first round of the season so he wasn't a threat."

Breen went on to finish third in class under SuperRally, keeping his title dream alive heading into Rally GB – where he finished third again to clinch the crown.

It was actually the second time this season that Breen had been forced to bounce back from a crash. Earlier in the year, his ambition led him to believe he could beat the entire Group N contingent on the Circuit of Ireland in his Fiesta.

"At the start of day three, we were 15 seconds off the Group N lead. I was listening to the other drivers saying how bad the fog was. I was sitting there nodding away at them and striking them off one by one. It came back and bit me when I rolled into the scenery," he says. "But the best way to get over an accident is to drive on the limit on the next rally. Killarney was next and I was fastest on the first stage."

Breen is planning on a British championship campaign in 2010, and has shelved plans to go to university to focus on his rallying.

"The original plan was to go to college but once things started to go well in rallying that went out the window," he says. ■

Breen has able support in Facebook friend

Rallying is a team effort and Craig Breen is quick to praise the efforts of his co-driver Gareth Roberts.

The MSA Rally Elite member first teamed up with Breen on Rallye Sunseeker in February. "I found him on Facebook," says Breen of Roberts, who won last year's UK and Irish Fiesta titles with Elfyn Evans.

"Gareth was a huge part of my season and I landed on my feet when I found him. I asked him if he wanted to do Sunseeker as a one-off and he did a great job. It just suited me and him and it

just worked from stage one. His strong points are the stuff he does behind the scenes – he is always ringing people and he is active sassing things out.

"I read the regs before every rally and I might call him to query something and he will already have it sorted out. He keeps me from being flustered on a rally. There are no dramas because all his homework is done. It is a serious task for a young guy like that to organise everything the way he does. It is a big responsibility but he does a great job every time."



Breen (right) is quick to praise his Welsh co-driver Roberts