

# Well deserved break for Breen after battle of Sardinia

BY TREVOR MCGRATH

The way things were going, Waterford rally driver, Craig Breen almost had to carry his Fiesta R2 back to Olbia at the finish of Rally Sardinia last week.

Seventh overall, four fastest stage times, retirement on day one, SupeRally, rear hub failure and this is just the tip of the iceberg as round two of the FIA WRC Academy turned into a war of attrition in the Mediterranean. "What more do I have to do? Caught in dust on SS13, rear hub failure on SS14, dropped back to 7th BUT, made it back to the finish!" were the words from the 21-year-old year as he exited his battle-scarred machine after two grueling days on the Italian Island.

Victory can give true sense of elation but there are times when grinning out a result is even more character building. Craig's preparation for round two of the FIA WRC Academy had been meticulous. Three good results since round one in Portugal, including an excellent performance last weekend at the Pirelli International in the UK. All looked to be falling in to place for a good attack on the Sardinian stages.

This was reinforced as the times started to flow in on Friday morning as the event got underway. Craig immediately picked up where he left off in the Algarve by setting fastest time on the first stage. On that opener, Lago Omodeo stage (10.21km) Craig was 2.2 seconds faster than his nearest rival Brendan Reeves (AUS) and 3.6 faster than Victor Henriksson (SWE) in third. The Irish ace then backed that up by claiming fastest on stage two Monte Grighini (21.32 km) extending his advantage to 6 seconds over Henriksson, who moved in to second overall as Reeves dropped to third 15.2 back.

On stage three it was Henriksson who topped the time sheets and moved back to within 2.9 of Craig. Breen was second fastest on the test with only one more stage remaining before the midday service. On that final stage in the morning loop Craig fell victim to a rock that had been exposed by the front runners. The offending hazard ruptured the sump on his Fiesta R2 immediately sending him into retirement for the day. Including rally leader Breen, a total of six crews



Craig Breen in action in Sardinia in the WRC.

suffered the same fate on that dreaded stage four. Victor Henriksson who was trailing Craig in second place, Dutch driver Timo van der Marel, Matteo Brunello, Andrea Crugnola and Yeray Lemes all saw their rally come to a premature end.

Craig was devastated, "I have worked hard during the intervening time since round one in Portugal. Good results on build up events in the UK and Ireland, together with my physical training and this week our recce was very precise due to the nature of the stages, to end the day like this is very disappointing, our only option now is SupeRally tomorrow and set some fastest stage times."

After taking Friday evening to recompose, a fully focused Breen emerged on Saturday morning and with a repaired R2, the Irishman was back setting fastest class times again. After starting the day in eighth position he was after gaining three places by the midday service and with only three stages remaining, a haul of 10 points looked on the cards from his fifth position.

There was another sting in the tail however as on stage 13, Craig looked on course to set another fastest time but as he reeled in the competitor he was hampered by the trailing dust; Craig reported, "There was at least 40

seconds dropped as a result. On to the last stage and only a few kilometres in when Craig saw a flash in his door mirror and felt a jolt from the rear of the car. Then to his amazement he spotted one of his rear wheels had sheered off. With the car pulling to one side the Irish/Welsh crew were left to nurse the car to the end of the stage and hope they could get the ailing Ford Fiesta back to the finish. After exiting the stage and dropping over three minutes they accessed the damage and with determination of true champions got the car back to Olbia.

At the finish Craig stated, "This has been one of the most demanding events I've ever competed on. I was gutted yesterday when we stopped on stage four; SupeRally today gave us the opportunity to regain some more points. Then this evening over the last two stages, getting caught in dust on (stage) 13 and rear hub failure on the last (stage) it was just unbelievable but there was no way we weren't going to make the finish.

"We have a break now in the championship until July and round three in Finland. WRC Finland will mark the midway point in the season and scoring maximum points there will be very important."