

Craig's Column...

Making a splash in Sardinia...

PHOTOS: GRAHAM CHAMBERS



Craig in one of the many watersplashes on the stages in Sardinia



Craig (right) chats to Ford Motorsport's Gerard Quinn

7th overall and the contest over the two days was just what I required before Sardinia.

WRC ACADEMY: ROUND TWO WORLD RALLY SARDINIA

After our exit when leading round one, I wanted to impress in Sardinia, but from the start of our recce it was clear we were facing our toughest rally ever. Located high in the mountains, each stage had its own characteristics. Some were narrow tracks with water splashes, where others were more technical with twists and turns, which would not allow a driver to get a rhythm.

GUEST LECTURES

Over the course of the week in Sardinia we were treated to two guest lectures. On Monday Mario Isola of Pirelli joined us to discuss the academy. Mario is a very interesting character, covering not only the WRC Academy and regional championships, but also Formula 1. He's a great guy, and it was enjoyable to listen to his experience with Pirelli. With our recce completed on Wednesday, that evening we were treated to 45 minutes in the company of former World Rally Champion Petter Solberg. It was fascinating to hear him talk about his climb from early beginnings in Norway to the top of WRC, culminating with his World championship win in 2003. Petter also gave an insight to his struggle on forming his own team and building it to where it is today. The evening was truly inspirational.

It was back to business on Thursday morning with event shakedown, the stage was very slippery not like that of the rally so we decided to just make sure all was ok with the car and we only did three passes. That evening after the ceremonial start, I had one final check of the recce DVD and the pacenotes, I was ready.

DAY ONE

Friday morning we had a long road section out to the opening stage. The stage itself was smooth and wide but my strategy was to take it steady and bed myself in, I was amazed at the end when we recorded the quickest time by two seconds. Alastair (Fisher) was not so lucky however as he was out already with mechanical failure which was very disappointing. Stage two, fastest again and this brought back memories of Portugal. Stage three was going to be more of a handful as it was tricky and slippery in sections. I decided not to take any chances, just

two seconds off a hat trick of fastest times, but our lead was still in hand.

It still hurts now writing about it, stage four 8kms in, on a slight right hand bend the car bottomed out and impacted a protruding rock rupturing the sump. I immediately shut off the engine as I knew from the shudder of the impact there was a lot of damage. After pulling over and exiting the cockpit our suspicions were confirmed when we saw all the oil had drained out. I wasn't the only (WRC) Academy Fiesta to be sidelined by the offending obstacle; seven other academy crews saw their event come to a premature end. We were very lucky to be only one of two that were able to restart using SupeRally on Saturday, as the rest had suffered terminal engine trouble.

SUPERALLY

Restarting from 8th position on Saturday our goal was clear, fastest stage times were the order of the day. I really liked the opener, it was a fast stage that I could commit 100% and we achieved our goal, 20 seconds quicker than my nearest academy rival. Remembering from the recce, I knew the next two stages were very rough so I decided to control my pace, we had gained time on the opener and pushing now could cause more problems.

After a 30min service in Olbia we tackled the same loop again. I repeated my plan on the first and was quickest by 10 seconds this time. We consolidated our position on the next so we were fighting back up to fifth overall going in to the penultimate test. I thought my difficulties were overcome but I couldn't have been more wrong. Only a short distance in to that stage we caught up with two slower crews and were forced to drive in their trailing dust for 10kms, resulting in us dropping a place back to 6th.

THE FINAL STAGE

We were only three seconds away from 5th and I was confident that I could gain back that overall place. That was until just a few corners in, when the rear hub disintegrated without any reason and we were on three wheels. We nursed the car out of the stage hemorrhaging time with every kilometre. All our hard work was for nothing, we were back to last and I still didn't know if we would be able to get the car back to the finish. After some make-shift repairs at the end of the stage we struggled back to Olbia with a battle-scarred R2. So with two Academy rounds down and eight points on the board we have a lot of ground to make up. Finland comes next and it will be MAXIMUM ATTACK!

RETURN TO THE BLACK STUFF

With two tarmac events coming up after Finland in the WRC Academy, I made my transition to the black stuff at the Jim Clark. It was unusual to nearly reach the month of June before tasting asphalt for the first time but that's



Back on the 'black stuff' on the Jim Clark Rally

the way it's worked out this year. The rally was again based in the Scottish border town of Kelso and had the usual Friday evening/Saturday format with some very fast stages. On completion of our recce the biggest question was the weather, if the weekend remained fine tyre choose would be easier but rain or worse showers were forecast making tyre choose a lottery. With the formalities of the ceremonial start out of the way it was off to the first stage. I made the decision to go with a soft tyre for the night stages and we took a cautious approach on the opening loop of three stages. At the re-group, I was happy in 2nd in both R2 and the Fiesta Sport Trophy and third in F2. Over the rerun of the loop I punched in some quicker times lifting myself into an overnight class lead and 2nd in F2. Ten stages were scheduled for Saturday and we made the perfect start with fastest time in R2. Our good run ended on stage eight after a brush with a hedge which punched a hole in the radiator, yet another rally that I came away from with a feeling of what could have been.

RALLYE DU LIMOUSIN

Only a week after the Jim Clark I continued my tarmac testing when I made my competitive debut on French soil. We travelled over to take part in the Rallye du Limousin. Held over two days with a total of six stages the event was held in central France. Friday evening saw us take on two stages, the first was 23kms and the second was a short 2.34 super special. I was seeded at 136th but from the off, I moved up to 41st and overnight held 2nd in R2. Saturday, day two was made up of four stages, nothing special there but the rally was defined by the Ronde de Vassiviere stage at 47.3km which was taken on 4 times. Over the first pass I took over the lead in R2 and moved up to 36th overall. Stage 4 was cancelled but stage 5 saw us move up to 24th

overall and extend our class lead. With the final stage also being cancelled, we rounded off the good day with a class win and 24th overall. I was really happy with this rally. The FFSA championship is the home of front-wheel drive rallying, the best there is. We won our class comfortably, and we even set a time on Stage 5, good enough for 11th O/A! We had proved our speed on a specialized surface like European Asphalt, we're moving the right way.

Up Next: As I write we're only a week away from my home event, the Ravens Rock Rally. It's my first time to take it on and I'm counting down the days because I've decided to use the S2000. The rally is based in Co. Kilkenny and is a round of the Dunlop National Tarmac Championship. It will be interesting to go up against the WRC cars and I'll bring you all the details in the next issue. After that I switch back to the R2 car and the loose next for Rally Estonia. It's another event I haven't competed in before but we're taking it in as the nature of the stages are similar to Finland. With a little luck it will pay off and our trip to Jyväskylä in August will be very fruitful.

OUTSIDE THE COCKPIT

On the last Sunday in May I attended the Irish Motorsport Expo in Kilkenny. The event was organised by fellow members of the Carrick-on-Suir Motor Club. It turned out to be a great success with some nice machinery on display. I had my S2000 car there and Dad's Focus was just finished in time to take pride of place on one of the stands, it looked great. My supporters club was present, thanks again to Billy Collins, Jamie Kent and Bill Murphy. The day ended with a young driver's forum and I was joined on the panel by Alastair Fisher, Robert Barrable, Toni Kelly, Vincent McAree and Stephen Wright. Host for the evening was Martin Walsh and there were some questions from the floor. A great day's Motorsport

entertainment was had by all. Well done again to all who organised the event and a special well done to Buckstown Motorsport, I'm thinking of getting you to do my servicing in future.

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION

Thanks again to everyone who took the time to email a question. This month's question is from Eddie Watterson in Co. Antrim and his question is:

This is a three part question Craig. If you could have rallied against any driver, in a car of your choice on a rally of your choice past or present, who would you drive against, in what car and on what rally?

Well, I'll let my imagination run riot! I'm a massive, and I mean massive Frank Meagher fan. He was and still is my idol, and to compete against anyone else, wouldn't be competing against the best. I suppose his ex-Richie Healy Escort, 2223 IM, was the most iconic car he had so we'll pick that! I was a big fan of "Black Beauty" DKP 191T, Vatanen's Famous black Shell Oils car, that would be my pick. Frank always seemed to go well in the Ravens Rock, and it's my home rally, so that's a perfect choice!

It's the stuff that dreams are made of, but just to be around watching Frank as a young-fella, hanging off ditches in the pouring rain, to win the Stonethrowers for what felt like the 100th time, it was magic.

NEXT ISSUE

The next issue will be dominated by our WRC Academy trip to Finland but I will also relive my testing on Rally Estonia and we'll be back on tarmac with WRC ADAC Rally Deutschland. Keep an eye out for the Kel-tech Engineering Fiesta and I'll see you soon!

Email your questions to: craigbreenrallying@gmail.com

To keep in touch with Craig Breen Rallying log on to www.craigbreen.com
And to find out more on the FIA WRC Academy log on to www.wrc.com/wrc-academy