

The 2012 World Rally Championship (WRC) Academy season has come to a close with the running of the final round of the series, Rally Spain. Australians Brendan Reeves and Rhianon Smyth headed into the event hoping to make history - the right result would have rewarded them with a number of 'firsts', however mechanical issues and difficult weather conditions put paid to their hopes on the first day. Brendan went into the event sitting in second place in the Academy drivers' championship, two points ahead of Spaniard Jose Suarez, whilst Rhianon led the co-driver standings over Suarez's co-driver Candido Carrero by 12 points. A finish ahead of the Spanish duo would have guaranteed Rhianon the co-drivers' title, whilst Brendan was keen to finish the season as the second-placed driver after Welshman Elfyn Evans claimed the title at the previous round. Day 1 of Rally Spain threw up plenty of challenges for the Australian brother and sister. Heavy rain made the road conditions extremely slippery and Brendan struggled with the set-up of his Ford Fiesta R2 on the day's opening stages. With a change to the set-up, he was having a good run in the next stage until sustaining a puncture. After changing the puncture, Brendan was then held up behind another car for about ten kilometres, costing him more valuable time. Brendan decided to play it safe and take a cautious approach on the afternoon's stages to make it safely to the end of the day. Unfortunately, during the end-of-day service, Brendan's mechanics discovered broken valve springs on his engine. The team decided to make the necessary repairs to avoid further engine issues on Saturday. Repairing the engine meant Brendan and Rhianon would have to abide by Rally 2 rules, meaning they would take a 10 minute time penalty into the following day. This placed them eighth Academy crew going into Day 2. As the only mixed-surface event on the calendar, the mechanics were also kept busy changing the entire set-up of the Fiesta from gravel-spec to tarmac-spec overnight. Brendan started Day 2 of Rally Spain positively but was always going to be playing 'catch up'. He set some consistently good stage times on the tarmac, his least-favoured surface, and had moved up to sixth outright by the end of the day. Suarez won the event and in doing so clinched second in the championship with his co-driver taking out that title. Whilst disappointed with their final position, Brendan was only looking forward at the end of the rally, having shown considerable improvement in his stage times this year, his second season in the WRC Academy. "This certainly wasn't our event," he said. "We had a puncture yesterday and then the valve springs went on us, so we decided to fix it and take the penalty rather than run the risk of blowing the engine today. That meant that we were in no-mans land today. We finished fourth in the championship which is one better than last year but we really came here to get second. It is really disappointing. Our times were much better in the dry this afternoon, but even then our pace wasn't quite able to match the guys at the front. But that is just the way it is sometimes and we will hopefully be on to brighter and better things next year." Brendan and Rhianon readily admit their 2012 season would not have been possible without the support of their many fans and sponsors. Their Fiesta's bonnet featured the names of 40 supporters at Spain who happily contributed funds in return for the thrill of seeing their name on a rally car competing at the highest level. Returning home to Australia this week, Brendan and Rhianon will take a few days to reflect on their season but are already considering their options for 2013. Keen to remain competing at the highest level, Brendan was pleased to learn last week that next year's Academy championship will be re-named the Junior World Rally Championship, and with the category allowing drivers up to 26 years of age to compete, Brendan will again be eligible. Competing again in the junior championship is just one

option the talented young driver will consider.

Rally de Espana provisional results:

1.Suarez 3:46:51.3, 2.Tidemand +1:19.7, 3.Evans +2:02.6, 4.MacCrone +5:19.2, 5.Van Der Marel +2:42.9, 6.Reeves +1:57.9, 7.Domzala +12:15, 8, DNF Ahlin.

Provisional championship results (6/6 events):

1.Evans 2.Suarez 3.Tidemand 4.Reeves 5.MacCrone 6.Fisher 7.Van Der Marel 8.Ahlin