

Leading duo start as they mean to go on

ISLEHAM

THERE are few certainties in life, but some are pretty much guaranteed at Isleham. It will be cold; it will be windy; it will rain at some point; the ground will get cut up, but it'll ride pretty much OK. And Oliver Townend and Piggy French will win the main sections.

This was once again the story at the inaugural event of 2007, but all credit should go to Clem Tompsett and his organising team for being able to run so early in the season. The peat-based ground absorbs much more water than many other tracks do, but it does cut up quite badly which means that it always looks much worse than it rides.

The organisers did their best to minimise the ill-effects and the show jumping track was rolled regularly on Saturday, while the cross-country received a 'going-over' at the crack of dawn on Sunday. The majority of horses copied admirably, though, and as Emily Gilruth commented: "I've hunted in much worse."

With 22 horses to compete between them over the weekend, it was inevitable that Oliver, Piggy and stable jockey Angus Smales would feature prominently in the placings, and they did not disappoint.

It was a case of better late than never for Piggy and Lavinia Wells' Badminton-bound Boherdeel Champion, last to go in the OL.

The pair held up the proceedings for several minutes after Champion lost a shoe just as he was about to leave the lorry, and an impromptu visit to the farrier was called for before he could run across country.

In the event, Boherdeel Champion was obviously kitted out with a 'go faster' pair, as he went on to make light work of the course to retain his



above intermediate winners Oliver Townend and Waterview

first-phase lead, completing on 375, and finishing six penalties ahead of runners-up Lisa Maynard and First Frost.

"He did really well today," said Piggy. "He's a horse who benefits from quite a lot of runs as he gets very excited at events, but I worked him yesterday, too, and he did a lovely test.

"I never miss Isleham. I've been coming for years and the organisers are really accommodating. The ground was fine in places, but some of the take-offs and landings were a bit punishing towards the end of the day, but all my horses coped."

Piggy also rode Holly Blue Curtis, who is being aimed at Bramham, into fifth place, but she was not so lucky with Chicago II, who was penalised with 20 penalties after hesitating at the first part of the water complex.

"He hesitated for about half a second and then popped over. I nearly said something to the fence judges at the time, but I don't like to make a fuss. However, I do think the penalties were a bit harsh," said Piggy.

Lisa Maynard and Bob Lees' 10-year-old First Frost prevented a French/Townend whitewash in the OL when they sneaked ahead of Oliver and the former Nick Turner ride Iron Brew to take second place.

"We're absolutely delighted," beamed Lisa. "It's been a very emotional day for us as this has been our first outing since Bob's wife, Fiona, lost her fight against cancer. We came here as I wanted an early run and you can virtually guarantee that you'll get that here.

SNIPPETS

ROYAL APPROVAL
 LANDOWNER and Isleham event president Clem Tompsett had an extra reason to feel proud of himself this year. He was awarded an MBE for his services to agriculture in the New Year Honours List.

CAUGHT SHORT
 ONE unfortunate lady was literally caught with her pants down on Saturday. While answering the call of nature in one of the portaloos, the earth moved under her feet when the cubicle was picked up and shifted by a tractor while she was still inside!

"First Frost has done quite a lot of show jumping and dressage over the winter and he seems all the better for it. He's still a bit of a drama queen, which wasn't helped by my hat falling off in the dressage, but he went like a tiger across country, although I didn't think we'd gone that fast!"

Andrew Cawthray's talented prospect Iron Brew is likely to prove a useful addition to the Townend stable. Oliver and the grey cemented their new relationship with a third place, adding just 10 time penalties to their dressage score of 34.8.

"He has a lot of ability, but still has quite a bit of improving to do," said Oliver. "But he proved today that he's the horse I thought he was."

A happy sight

Andrew must have been a happy man by the end of the day as Oliver also rode another of his horses, Waterview, into first place in the sole intermediate section.

"We've had a full weekend here," said Oliver. "But that's one of the reasons we come here as the organisers really do their best to enable us to run as many horses as possible. Overall I'm pleased with the way they've all gone. I've got a few new youngsters and my aim was to bring them here to find out more about them. A couple of the novices made some green mistakes, but nothing that can't be fixed."

Polly Stockton's working pupil Fiona Jonason made the trip from Cheshire to her 'old stomping ground' at Isleham (both her parents are part of the organising team) worthwhile when she rode Julie Isaacson's Zinzan Tiger into second place in the intermediate.

Only Oliver and Waterview went faster across country and Fiona was rewarded with a score of 36.2 for her dressage test.

A delighted Emily Gilruth finished third and fifth with Henry and Edna Harding's Ashdale Cruise Master and CS President respectively – not bad going considering both horses only made the switch to eventing from show jumping last year.

Sue Polley



above Jennifer Butler and Home Alone II, fourth in the intermediate