

# Flint proves a cut above the rest

At Express Eventing, the innovative 'one seat sees all' indoor competition held at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium, Oliver Townsend and Flint Curtis are streets ahead of the rest. **JULIE HARDING** reports on one man's triumph and another rider's tragedy

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IT turned out to be mainly about money. The Express Eventing International Cup, the much-hyped 'showcases' event dreamed up by multi-horse trials organisers Stuart Buntine and staged at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium on a freezing Sunday in late

November, cost a mint to run, failed to balance the books when less than half of the anticipated 40,000 crowd turned up, and offered a bumper prize of \$100,000 to the winner. The brand new concept saw the 19 star combinations perform

dressage to music, judged by, among others, choreographer Arlene Phillips, better known as the no-nonsense critic on the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, plus composer Andrew Lloyd Webber. The influential 26-country phases that followed were

split by a pit stop for a kit change. Oliver Townsend, riding Flint Curtis, was the competitor who rose to this extraordinarily difficult challenge to collect the impressive winner's cheque, the tough Yorkshireman

shedding a rare tear which had "nothing to do with the performance. I was just desperate to get the money", he confessed. It would, he added, pay for three months of his mortgage.

But by the time the money was distributed during a mounted prize-giving, Mary King and her connections were in mourning, devastated by the death of Call Again Cavalier, the penultimate horse to run in the reverse order jumping phases. He had fallen at fence 12, the second corner at the Duck Houses, when drifting right and taking on the fence at its widest part. Giving a whinny of distress, the 16-year-old gelding was

taken out of the arena in a horse ambulance — which subsequently got stuck in the exit chute — and put down, in great pain from a suspected broken femur (see News).

Even before this tragedy, the critics of Express Eventing had already started their mumbblings as chaos reigned during the jumping phases, the complicated and mingled courses in the rarefied atmosphere of the Millennium Stadium fazing even the most experienced campaigners, who included a Badminton winner (Hidago De L'ile), Badminton runner-up (Shaabrak), individual Olympic bronze medalist (Miners Frolic) and

nine horses who have run at past Olympic Games.

A series of shock eliminations — one or two prompted by a fairly last-minute alteration to the courses which competitors were required to relearn and rewalk in their 30-minute lunch break — meant that only six finished the competition.

Stuart Buntine commented: "The eliminations were] disappointing, but this was a serious competition with some of the best riders and horses in the world. The fences came up quickly but the riders here are used to galloping with space, as well as roping, between fences."



above Clayton Fredericks and Ben Along Time finish fourth below runners-up Lucy Wiegiersma and Shaabrak



above a bird's eye view of the Millennium Stadium right French competitor Rudolphe Scherer, who failed to finish, during the kit change pit-stop



above the final course-walk before the afternoon jumping session right Kiwi rider Caroline Powell, sixth with Lenamore



right judges Andrew Lloyd Webber and Arlene Phillips talk to Alice Plunkett



### Moving to the beat

Earlier in the morning when the fun factor was still fresh in people's minds, recent Pau CCI\*\*\* winners Bettina Hoy and Ringwood Cockatoo put plenty of pizz into their four-minute flatwork session to strains of The Beatles' Lady Madonna and Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da. "I'm amazed at how well the horses have coped," said Bettina when the dressage was concluded. "I thought they would get more excited and nervous. It was so much fun to ride dressage to music and the music emphasised the way Cockatoo moved."



above William Fox-Pitt coaxes a spooky Ballincoola around for third spot below Vittoria Panizzon and Rock Model storm over the fences for fifth place

The grey's performance, which included plenty of swing and presence and no mistakes, wasn't only enough to impress Arlene and Andrew, but also the technical experts, Frances Verboek-von Rooy, Isobel Wessels, Andrew Gardner and Jennie Loniston-Clarke, who together awarded 50.97 (the highest score out of a total of 60). This gave Cockatoo a narrow lead over Call Again Cavalier (50.38), the only other horse to score in the 50s and for whom Mary King had thoughtfully chosen music from the hit Lloyd-Webber musical *Phantom of the Opera*.

China's Alex Hua Tian and FEW Chico lay in third (49.69), Oliver Townsend was fourth (49.06) and Clayton Fredericks and Ben Along Time (47.66) fifth, just ahead of Lucy Wiegiersma and Shaabrak (46.59).

Dressage scores were converted into time penalties prior to the jumping phases, the leader starting on 0, second on 1.19sec and so on, all the way down to 26.38sec for 19th place.

All of this gave Bettina plenty of time to wait and watch and mull over what was happening and as the action was halted while the corner fence at 8, broken by Mark Todd and Gandalf, was assessed and then removed from the competition, she said: "I've been seeing some amazing horses struggling, but watching is a benefit because you realise where horses may become insecure."

If ever a dressage phase has been rendered redundant at an eventing contest it was here, with five out of the first seven competitors eliminated. France's Rudolphe Scherer left the contest after Makara De Montjeu landed on his belly at the first cross-country bank, catapulting his jockey out of the saddle. Nicolas Touzart (Hidago De L'ile), Austin O'Connor (Hobby Du Mee) and Phillip Dutton (Connaught) were all eliminated for taking the wrong course, after which Austin commented on the late alterations: "I felt very stupid because the audience didn't know the facts."

### RESULTS

- 1, Flint Curtis (Oliver Townsend), 4min 25.01sec;
- 2, Shaabrak (Lucy Wiegiersma), 5min 07.95sec;
- 3, Ballincoola (William Fox-Pitt), 5min 10.72sec;
- 4, Ben Along Time (Clayton Fredericks), 5min 20.02sec;
- 5, Rock Model (Vittoria Panizzon), 5min 37.05sec;
- 6, Lenamore (Caroline Powell), 5min 47.23sec.

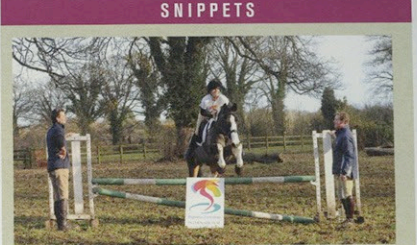


Houses, where they had been forced to renegotiate the second corner three times after twice jumping the wrong side of the red flag.

Italy's Vittoria Panizzon and Rock Model, who were also well down the order after the dressage, managed to notch up the second completion, which gave them eventual fifth place, but Tina Cook's Miners Frolic was eliminated for three refusals, the last of which came at the Duck Houses. "He was fazed by it. He froze and tightened in his back. There is a completely different atmosphere in there and we were in the company of very experienced horses and even they have found it tough," said Tina.

### Barely united

Even William Fox-Pitt and Ballincoola looked disunited at times, but their clear ground gave them a short-lived lead until they were overtaken by Lucy Wiegiersma and the classy Shaabrak, who had been in training



A CELEBRITY NIGHTMARE TARA Palmer-Tomkinson and Jodie Kidd had been signed up to provide the 12,704 spectators with some lunch time entertainment in the form of a celebrity jump off. The former had even received some expert tuition from Mark Todd and Oliver Townsend (above), but they must have omitted to mention studding up for the grassy ground, for with no studs for grip Tara's horse slipped over and she left the arena in tears.



specifically for this contest for a month and who ended up as the runners-up, with William in third.

"We had some nerve-wracking moments across country and I didn't deserve to win," confessed William. "Ballincoola is quite suspicious and today was out of the ordinary. The training I have put in for this was stressful and today wasn't much better. There wasn't much about it that was relaxing and fun. Out there was busy, tough and with some serious angles."

Clayton Fredericks, who entered the pit-stop ahead of Lucy on time, briefly forgot the route and lost precious seconds that cost him dear, for he finished on 5min 20sec and in fourth place. In between there was more mayhem. Linda Algotsson's veteran Stand By Me got no further than the offset bushes at 9, where he pulled the brakes for the third time. Kiwis Mark Todd (Gandalf) and Andrew

Nicholson (Avebury) similarly notched up three stops, both bowing out at the Duck Houses.

After the demise of Call Again Cavalier and Alex Hua Tian taking an erroneous route in the show jumping, Bettina Hoy had been given a cushion. But her heart wasn't in it and Cockatoo underperformed over the coloured poles, bowing out six before his rider signalled retirement.

As assessments began to be made about the inaugural Express Eventing opinions varied. "Too much went wrong," said Andrew Nicholson, but William Fox-Pitt countered with: "I think what Stuart has done here is unbelievable. Even as it was, it was quite an experience and something we don't get in our sport." Oliver Townsend called it a brave and bold move. "The day had its ups and downs, as it does in the sport, but this was a fantastic experience with a brilliant audience."