

The boy who wanted more

Oliver Townend has been the man to beat at one-day events this season. The sociable, straight-talking 22-year-old tells **PIPPA ROOME** — over lunch at his local pub — about his unquenchable thirst for winning and how he survived some tough early years with horses

Oliver in cross-country mode: "Wherever I go, I go to win"



AT the entrance to Oliver Townend's local pub — The Bell at Gumley — there is a sign banning, among other things, mobile phones and muddy boots. But when Oliver strolls in wearing his breeches, spurs and, admittedly clean, boots, I get the feeling these rules don't apply to him.

The locals propping up the bar know him by name and the lady serving makes a personal recommendation for his lunch choice.

"Can I have chips with my roast lamb?" he asks.

The request is permitted. When the lamb arrives he drowns it in mint sauce, so that the meat seems to be swimming in green gravy. He cleans up the last chips and veggies — politely checking if Kit, his head girl who has joined us, or I want any more.

The pub is just one of the benefits of being based

in Lubenham, just outside Market Harborough. The tidy yard Oliver rents from Morris and Viv Thompson holds 15 horses, and at the moment his string seems unstoppable. On the day we meet, I calculate he has had 87 starts so far this season, 32 top 10 placings and 21 wins. He also finished 12th at his first Badminton with a clear round across country inside the time.

"This is my first proper season," he says, which seems a strange announcement for someone who was on a Pony Europeans team nine years ago. But this is only his second year on his own, after three years as stable jockey to Kenneth Clawson. "Last year I was lucky to survive," he admits. "I left Kenneth's with £1,400 and no car. I worked like hell to pay my way."

A lot of his horses are other people's cast-offs, which partly explains his high hit rate. He says: "I've been fortunate to get on with horses other people don't click with. So some of them are not world class three-day horses, but they're good at one-days, so I ride them competitively there."

And competitive and Oliver Townend are certainly words that go together.

"Wherever I go, I go to win. I knew I wouldn't win Badminton, but that's what I aimed for. Actually, Badminton is probably the first time I haven't won and it wasn't a big disappointment."

Even his Badminton ride could be classed as a cast-off. The Hon William Russell's Topping had been round the event twice with Polly Williamson with relatively little success (he finished 42nd and 45rd) before coming to Oliver.

"A lot of people wrote him off and everyone thinks I turned an average horse good. But he's certainly better than average, you just have to find the right key."

"Badminton was a strange time. I've wanted to do it forever and these last four or five years

I've put myself through a lot to get there. And then in 12 minutes [on the cross-country] it's gone and you don't know whether to laugh or cry. I couldn't really talk about it. I still get a bit wet about it."

I don't expect Oliver to be the tearful type, but, it's true, he's welling up now just thinking about it. Most of the time, though, it's big grins and loud laughter and he's keeping his feet on the ground. Although he'd love to get a place on the British squad at the Europeans at Blenheim in September, he's realistic, and says: "I've just got to keep it in perspective."

In that, he is helped by his parents, Alan and Eve, who recently moved from Yorkshire to live next door. Oliver says:

"They're straight people who can manage every situation."

Raised in Scapengo Hill on the outskirts of Huddersfield, Oliver is an only child — "My parents say I'm the equivalent of six," he jokes — whose father rode at Burghley and mother showed side-saddle at county level. In terms of the family's occupation, Oliver mentions mill rounds and mending farm machinery. Oh, and dealing horses.

"It's a bit like the Dingles on *Emmerdale*," he laughs. "I'm the odd one out. Everyone where I come from has skinheads and tattoos."

Oliver's first noticeable ride was the 14.2hh Cool Mule, whom Alan bought for £825 out of a cowshed. By the time the pony was six, Oliver had won a show jumping class on him at the Horse of the Year Show, and he also made an appearance on the Pony eventing team. By the time he was in his mid-teens he had produced Gold Ringer — who came from Doncaster Bloodstock sales — to Grand Prix level show jumping and advanced eventing and won a Home International Young Rider gold medal show jumping a mare called Kilkenny Diamond.

"My one regret is having to sell all those horses so early," he says. "And after those successes, from the ages of sixteen to twenty I was disappointed with everything I did. I couldn't win anything and I was just a kid looking back."

Although Oliver says this with a smile, there were some tough moments, particularly during the years with Kenneth Clawson. He

"I learnt a lot about life. I moved down south and they career up a gear."

During that time he relied heavily on his girlfriend, Norfolk-based event rider Piggy French. Although he readily admits the relationship has been on and off for three years, ultimately he believes their future is together. "But at the moment we're taking it one season at a time."

For this year, it's all systems go as he tries to make his mark. He comments: "I'm a bit sick of being a rising star. I hope I've done that bit and that I look a little more than that now."

Judy Bradwell trains him on the flat, while on the jumping side he often works horses with Tim Brown. He names Tim and his wife, Antonia, who live locally, among his best friends. Although he'd like a major sponsor, he does enjoy the backing of Toggli, and

'I've wanted to do Badminton forever and then it's gone and you don't know whether to laugh or cry. I couldn't talk about it'

the benefits of being on the World Class Potential squad. He feels fortunate to have five staff who are all pulling in the same direction as him, plus Moira Walsh who helps him with sponsorship and owner management. He tries to keep his supportive owners well informed. "Riding with one hand is quite a common occupation nowadays. When I ride with two it's amazing how well the horses go," he jokes, demonstrating trying to practise half pass with one hand while holding a mobile in the other.

But when he's not fooling around, Oliver strikes me as older than his 22 years. "I don't feel young," he agrees. "I've always had to make a living and my background is hard working. Now I have huge overheads and I'm very money orientated. At Badminton I knew how much every fence down was costing me."

On the subject of motivation he also says: "I'm a swine for wanting to prove people wrong. If someone says I can't do something I'm off to do it. And I beat myself up never than anyone. I never say 'never mind' and I always aim to do better, even if I win a class by 20 marks."

In the pub we stick to lighter topics, the conversation is easy and the laughter is free flowing. Oliver washes down his lamb and cheesecake with beer with a dash of lime. Afterwards he refuses to let me pay for my lunch, drives me to the station at breakneck speed and says goodbye with a kiss on the cheek. As I totter onto the train, awash with vodka, I'm left feeling that not only is he rather a good rider, Mr Townend is also excellent company. ■