

Oli banks the big one



Oliver Townsend lands his first Badminton at the age of 26, outshining his nearest rivals who all amass faults in the jumping phases.

JULIE HARDING reports from the 60th anniversary event. Additional reporting by AIMI CLARK

horse and the odd bit of good luck as his nearest rivals toppled from the top saw him lift this sought-after trophy at the relatively tender age of 26.

In a nailbiting finale on a warm Sunday afternoon, the top three were so tightly bunched that not a single show jump came between them. Oli's welcome cushion appeared when his two closest challengers, Lucy Wiegiersma and Italy's Roberto Rotatori, sent poles clattering to the floor. Oli didn't dare.

"I knew that if I didn't win it would be down to me," he said. "If I did the right thing Flint would pull it off."

One of the driving forces behind Oli's Badminton appearance was the £60,000 first prize, coupled with the points he could earn in the lucrative HSBC FEI Classics series – in which he had edged ahead following his first four-star victory.

Eventing 10 ACTION PACKED PAGES



Sam Griffiths and Happy Times negotiate the ditch at the Countryside Turn (fence 11) far left. Oli Townsend celebrates his win below left. William Fox-Pitt's Idalgo show jumps clear for second place. William was also sixth on Macchiato (pictured below left at the trot-up).

"I'm not crying poor but I'm 26 and I've bought a farm that I can't really afford and things like this do help but to win Badminton is indescribable."

Clear show jumping rounds propelled two new equine stars into the spotlight. William Fox-Pitt's patient wait for Idalgo to shine rewarded with second spot – his third at this event – while Australian Sam Griffiths piloted his 2008 Saumur winner Happy Times into third. William was fifth, too, on his Luhmühlen winner Macchiato.

"I'm excited for both horses," he said. "To have these coming on as well as my two from Kentucky [Seacocks and Navigator] and them all looking to be good four-star horses is great as you never know with new kids on the block."

Badminton 2009 was characterised by mainly happy faces, only the odd word of descent – notably some competitors feeling that they had received harsh dressage marks – three phases that each exerted an influence on the final result and an

acclaimed cross-country course with silksmoothing going. "It was a ride on a golf course," exclaimed one rider.

Event director and course-designer Hugh Thomas was able to bank in the notion that his job had been satisfactorily accomplished. "I thought [Saturday] was a good day's sport," he said. "The competition was exciting, conditions this year were perfect and it was a valid result – we got the horse and rider who deserved to win."

Stuart Buntine [on Radio Badminton]: "We want elegance not practicality. Running shoes for the trot-up are not what I'm after" [on Ruth Edge's pairing of a light trouser suit with trainers]. Harriet Harrison: "Yes, but they are designer trainers."

New riders as well as debutante equines sparked Italy's foremost rookie Roberto Rotatori finishing fourth with the French-bred Irahm De Vaiges. Roberto, though, was not alone in experiencing that sinking feeling in the final phase as penalty after penalty racked up. Lucy Wiegiersma, too, left the arena with a downcast face, another Badminton crown having just slid from the grasp of last year's runner-up.

"It's very frustrating and disappointing but six weeks ago we weren't even planning to come here," said Lucy, referring to the after-effects of a run at Fontainebleau which left the gelding with strained back muscles (see News). "He's not been in the ring since then and, to be fair, he held it together until he hit the fence in the treble. He then didn't lock onto the planks, after which it was 'thank you and goodbye'."

Lady luck deserted Karin Donckers too. The Belgian who led the dressage and thought she may be on for an historic win for her home country accumulated half a dozen cross-country time faults and then 12 in the show jumping to wind up seventh. To make her slide even more of a poisoned chalice, Karin and her mare Gazelle De La Brasserie had experienced an almost identical slip at last year's Olympic Games in Hong Kong.

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above dressage leaders Karin Donckers and Gazelle De La Brasserie, who were seventh

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above Stuart Buntine and Happy Times in dressage

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above Emily Llewellyn and the Duchess of Beaufort in dressage

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ALL ABOUT... AARON MILLAR AND STORMSTAY



DEVON'S Aaron Millar put in a clear cross-country round inside the time with his 16-year-old gelding Stormstay to finish 43rd at his first Badminton. However, the 22-year-old nearly didn't make his debut.

"I didn't think I was coming because he had a corn and went lame three weeks ago," said Aaron. "I talked myself out of it but luckily he came sound in time to get back on track."

Aaron's 16-year-old gelding scored 74.7 penalties in the first phase.

"Stormstay's not a dressage horse and he never will be. He's an older horse and he's never got to grips with the flying changes, so rather than risk blowing the test we did them through trot."

Aaron started his eventing career as a stable jockey to Lucy Wiegiersma, and he credits Lucy and Caroline Craighead with helping him get to his first Badminton.

Caroline found Stormstay for seven years ago," added Aaron, who trains with Caroline, Matt Frost and Justin Tull. "I can't fault the horse; he's a real machine and he just keeps trying."

and, unable to leap, he tried but failed to clamber over the imposing obstacle after which his disappointed jockey signalled retirement.

Kiwi Dan Jocelyn had a tough time with the Mitsubishi Quarry (22/23/24). It was here that the 15-year-old gelding dangled a leg at the first of the double of odd legs, then ducked out at the second, propelling his jockey over the fence alone where he proceeded, with a gymnast's accuracy, to roll and land on his feet.

Phoebe Buckley and Little Tiger lost one of their 'lives' at the leg on top of the Outlander Bank (10) when the diminutive grey mare left a leg, she proceeded to mar her otherwise thrilling round by running past the first of

Ruth Edge endures a rough ride on Mayhem III, eighth, pictured jumping one of the HSI Farmyard corners



THERE REALLY IS A POINT TO IT



MORE than 20 riders donned a Point Two air jacket as they galloped around Badminton's first phase.

The jacket sits on top of a rider's shirt and back protector and is attached to the saddle. If they fall off the attachment is broken and the jacket instantly inflates.

"It's like wearing an extra T-shirt," said Paul Tapner, who had experienced the jacket's full effect during a fall while contesting the advanced at Whittington the week before.

"All the corner combination I was thrown into the second element and the jacket inflated so I didn't feel the impact. It saved me from bruising and broken ribs and probably wouldn't be [at Badminton] without it."

The air jacket retails at £399 and one inflated a new canister needs to be fitted for it to be reused. It slowly deflates after 15-20 seconds.

"Riders were concerned about being attached to the saddle but it takes a stone of pressure to break the cord so if you catch it while riding it won't inflate," added Paul.

Three riders activated their Point Two while riding across country at Badminton – Olivia Haddow (above), Angus Snalles and Matthew Wright.

backwards and she lay on the geldings back for a couple of strides before righting herself and turning right to tackle the little used longer route out of the complex.

Jo May and Faere Vision ran out of oomph at the leg on top of the Outlander Bank after which the 10th placed pair retired. Tristram Owers also pulled up his new ride Muschamb Impala following a refusal here, the gelding unable to improve on his first four-star round, which consisted of two eliminations last year.

Emily Baldwin, who had already divulged that water fences at four-star level were her nemesis – Drivetime ran out in Badminton's lake last year and then fell in the water at Pau – saw her worst fears realised when her mount ground to a halt at the brush fence in the middle of the lake.

The crowd waiting patiently by Badminton's iconic water feature would be left disappointed had they come hoping for a ducking this year. Not a single pair were submerged and even James Robinson, whose Comanche had gone for a swim here last time, stormed through on their way to a well judged clear round which was just three

ALL ABOUT... TONY WARR AND COOLGRANGE MERGER



EQUINE vet Tony Warr had a less than perfect build up to his first Badminton, where he finished 44th aboard Coolgrange Merger, when his horse was completely purchased to be demolished and make way for development of the A21.

"It's been hanging over me for five years and it finally came to a head 10 days ago," said Tony, who is based in Kent with wife Sarah and his two daughters. "Thankfully Ellie Hughes' family took the horses in at short notice and I'm looking for something permanent in the same area."

Tony grew up doing Pony Club and Junior eventing in Australia. When he arrived in the UK 22 years ago he rode in point-to-points for Sarah's father, which spiralled into a 12-year racing career.

"Riding at Ascot among the professionals was a highlight and seriously good fun," recalls Tony.

Despite some good results on the racing circuit his heart lay in eventing and Tony bought the 11-year-old Coolgrange Merger eight years ago from David White, who found the gelding at the Gorebridge Horse Sales in Ireland.

"He's not flashy and was quite average up to novice level and he went out and won his first intermediate and everything seemed to kick start from there," said Tony.

seconds over the time. In fact, the only other minor casualty of this fence was Dan Jocelyn's second ride Special Attorney, who collected 20 penalties for a stop at the mid-water brush.

Olivia Haddow's Fortunesnight trailed a leg over the Mitsubishi L200s and the pair ended up in a heap on the landing side, Olivia's Point Two air jacket inflating like a balloon to cushion her fall.

Sharon Hunt was eliminated right at the start of the course when a reluctant Tankers Turn refused to enter the start box.

Caroline Powell and Lenamore, ninth, at the HSI Farmyard (14)



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the next fence, it was enticed off the track by a member of the public.

The main casualty During this dramatic section of the action, Penny Lawn became the event's most serious casualty when he incurred head injuries in a fall from Southway. He had skinned past the skinny, downhill b element of fence 6, the Alterian Hillside, propelling Penny out the side door. She was airlifted to Frenchay Hospital for observation.

Jade Lazenby's Master Blaster II ran out at the corner that formed the exit fence to the Shogun Hollow (9). This was the first, but not the last, influential corner question on the track and it also claimed the scalp of Louise Skelton's second horse Partly Picked, who was retired after his second round-out here.

Asia, the ride of Emily's Luisa Palli, took off a mile away and was brought down when catching his hind legs on the corner. Angus Snalles' Saxon Cross suffered an almost identical fall at the first corner at the HSI Farmyard, while eighth-placed Matthew Wright was ejected from IT You Want It's saddle at the brush corner in the Irish Sport Horse Studbook's Huntsman's Close (20) when the gelding, who was on course for a competent clear, missed his stride. Despite there being a tighter turn to the corner compared to last year, this fence caused far less havoc this time, with only two other problems, one a fall for Austrian horse Nebelwerfer, as well as a run-out for the oldest competitor, France's Bruno Bouvier riding Harry.

Mayhem III made Ruth Edge work hard throughout the 6,400m track but guts and determination brought reward in the form of the top spot, William Fox-Pitt and Macchiato finally outdressed.

Ruth would maintain her advantage until Italy's Roberto Rotatori took over. Then, in the closing stages of the competition, the lead swiftly changed hands. First it went to Shaabrak and then to Flint Curtis, both horses earning the same score – 40.5 – Shaabrak a whisker further away from the top spot due to the addition of 0.8 of a time fault.

Those with penalties in the 10s as opposed to single figures slipped significantly down the order but 16 horses did finish without cross-country faults of any kind, some of these coming home spectacularly within the time – George Spencer and Blaydon Night, contesting only their fifth event together, eight seconds inside; Harry Meade and the 19-year-old Midnight Dazzler 11 seconds inside and even Flint Curtis himself stopping the clock on 11min 27sec.

That was one of the most thrilling rides I've ever had, mainly because of the way he travelled," said Oli. "We were up on our minute markers and he was cantering along to Huntsman's Close rather than me having to shunt him."

A total of 59 horses completed, 12 were eliminated – mostly due to the one fall and you're out ruling – and nine were retired, a number pulled up after only a single blip.

While Matt's horse Bonza Puzzle gained the nod from the ground 25 by despite suffering a stone bruise which had needed plenty of icing after the cross-country, three horses did not. Louise Skelton's Bit Of A Barney, Emily Arnes' Balmoral Cavalier and Anna Hilton's Mr Dalby were all withdrawn from the holding box, while Louise Lockwood's Desert Island was held but passed on reinspection.

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above Harry Meade pilots the 19-year-old Midnight Dazzler into 10th place



above Matt Ryan demonstrates his new allegiance at the final trot-up

"Some people felt the course was softer than expected but for me with two first timers there was plenty to jump," said William Fox-Pitt.

A great showman Forget horses, Matt Ryan's appearance at the final trot-up became the main talking point. Beneath his jacket, Matt, who is still in the process of changing nationality from Australian to British, was sporting a huge Union Jack T-shirt. It caused much mirth among the crowd that had gathered in front of Badminton House to watch what has become something of a clothes show as well as a functional part of the event.

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