

6 WEEKS TO WEG 2014

'You'd give anything for gold medals'



Five years on from his last British squad appearance, Oliver Townend is off to the World Equestrian Games. He talks to Pippa Roome about his ride Black Tie II, buying a farm at 25 and why for the first time he's more of an event rider than a dealer

"I've always been fanatical — I drive the staff mad with their sweeping brushes," says Oliver Townend. "Well, concrete doesn't sweep itself and Oliver's home is certainly immaculate, from the beautiful old yard where his top horses reside — complete with hanging baskets — to the indoor barns, the horsewalker and the school. Few first-time buyers purchase a 36-acre

property, but Oliver signed for Gadlas Farm, in Shropshire, when he was 25 years old. He saw an advert and drove straight there in a groom's "knackered old" Vanhauw Corsa, as his sponsored Land Rover was in the garage. "They must have thought, 'What a waste of time' — a 25-year-old in a rusty car, first-time buyer." The young man from Huddersfield had wanted his own place "forever". "I was never really happy where I've lived

throughout my life," he says. Oliver's desire for everything to be perfect didn't always chime well with landlords. Now 31, he has been running his own business for 10 years. He has crammed a lot into a decade, from his British squad debut at the 2005 Europeans with Topping, to two European team golds and four-star wins on Flint Curtis and Carousel Quest. Now he is heading to his second World Equestrian Games (WEG) with a little black

Pictures by Peter Nelson

thoroughbred called Black Tie II. The horse belongs to New Zealander Karyn Shuter, who lives at Gadlas Farm half of most weeks (the other half is spent with her polo playing partner in Henley-on-Thames) and has been helping with "everything — entries, bills, logistics, owners, sponsors, riding and training" for more than four years.

A beautiful type
KARYN bought Black Tie II, by Mughtanim, in New Zealand, as an inexpensive five-year-old ex-racehorse. She competed him herself until she suffered a knee injury in 2010. Having met Oliver when she brought clients to try horses, she asked him to keep "Tonti" and her advanced horse Plain N' Simple going. "I saw her on Black Tie at a BE100 and

thought he was a beautiful type," explains Oliver. "I love a thoroughbred horse, he's jet black and he reminds you of a Charisma type [Mark Todd's double Olympic champion]. "Conformationally he's nearly perfect and if he was 17hh he'd be the sort of horse you'd see William Fox-Pitt on. He's the real deal. For me, he's what an event horse should be — blood. They won their first event together, a novice, and Karyn said Oliver could keep riding him. Intermediate fences felt big to start with for this perfect little package, who is barely 16.1hh. "He's just found more and more and the more confident he became, the more belief he has in himself and the more belief I have in him," says Oliver. "He's not particularly scopey, but he's just a trier. I have to get him to the right spot [in front of a fence] and give him plenty of squeeze. But he always lands with his ears pricked and gallops to the next. That was the nicest thing about [my ride on him at] Luhmühlen — if there had been another minute [of the course] he'd have done it." The fact that Black Tie went to Luhmühlen and impressed the British selectors with fourth place was "a twist of fate". After his Burnham Market CIC3* win (17-19 April), he was destined for Saumur alongside another horse, who cut himself beforehand. "I rang Karyn and said, 'What do you think about going to Luhmühlen?' She couldn't quite believe I'd said it, but eventually we convinced ourselves it was the right thing," Oliver says.

Looking forward to WEG
OLIVER'S frank attitude that medals don't put meals on the table has not always made him popular, but he stresses that he is looking forward to WEG. "It's fantastic to go to a World



Oliver on his WEG ride Black Tie II, with the horse's owner Karyn Shuter, who also helps him run his business



The spoils: Oliver's trophies, including the Butler Bowl (right) for best British rider at Badminton

Championships," he says. "To me Badminton and Burghley are bigger than the Olympics, but you would give anything to win gold medals. I just hope I do well for everybody. "At one stage I took it for granted that I was going [to championships]. I did my last World Championships at 23. It doesn't feel long ago, but you look at 23-year-olds now and think, 'Christ, I did a World Championships then.' I suppose I'm more mature. I don't think people realised how young I was. But I feel fitter now, I'm not as sore, I don't ride as many rough ones and fallers."

When it is suggested that he hasn't always had the easiest relationship with the British team hierarchy, he replies: "I don't think I have a bad relationship with the hierarchy, but some decisions obviously don't sit comfortably with me."

He is referring to being taken off the World Class Programme in 2012, soon after finishing fourth at Burghley, and doesn't think enough heed was paid to the horses he had coming through. "It takes time, but I believed I had more potential team horses than anybody," he says. He has been invited back on now and will, "of course", accept that fantastic support.

More event rider than dealer
FOUR-star wins are every rider's dream, but the reality of two in 2009 was a mixed bag for Oliver.

He explains: "It allows you to be happier with yourself going to those events knowing you can produce top results. I wouldn't change it, but perhaps because I was from a slightly



Oliver surrounded by four of his three-star campaigners (left to right): Skyhills Cavalier, ODT Ghareeb, Sandiman II and Cooley Master Class



Oliver has always admired his WEG ride Black Tie II: "I love a thoroughbred horse and conformationally he's nearly perfect"



The Badminton runner-up Armada, who has completed 12 four-stars with Oliver and former rider Andrew Nicholson

different background from your normal event rider and perhaps because I was young and possibly not politically correct, the publicity was nearly too much.

"The hype was so loud, then it was a shock to everyone that I didn't win Badminton and Burghley every year. People say I've been in the wilderness, but I've been in the top 10 in four-stars as much as anybody."

Nine times since 2010, for the record. "I haven't gone anywhere, but I've not had the horses who are there to win," he says. "And I sold Land Vision [who won Badminton 2011 with Mark Todd] — there are no regrets. If you ask what altered my life for the better, winning Badminton and Burghley or selling Land Vision, it's definitely selling Land Vision."

Dealing has always been the core of Oliver's business, but that is changing. "Winning Badminton and Burghley pretty much put a stop to my horse-dealing career," he says, explaining that people no longer thought they could do a better job than him on horses. But this is also the way he went. "It's the first time I've been in the position of being more of an event rider than a horse dealer."

Among his big owners are Angela Hislop —



Top: Sandiman II tucks into an impromptu snack

Below: Oliver Townend checks up on Black Tie II's work in his school at home in Shropshire



whose horses include the Ballindenisk CICO3* winner Cooley Master Class — and Andrew Cawthray, whose support enabled him to buy and sell smart horses and accumulate the deposit for Gadlas Farm.

His yard has 46 stables, but at present only about 30 horses for himself. The numbers fluctuate as he balances quality and quantity, but eventually he wants no more than 25 for himself. He also has a branded clothing line, a members' club — there's no open day this year

HARTHILL STUD

OLIVER has always been "fanatical" about breeding, which has led to his partnership with Nina Barbour at the Harthill Stud.

"We dealt so much and Dad would take me to Ireland as a kid, so I've always been interested in it. I felt the Irish had slightly lost the plot — there were horses that looked like event horses or jumpers, but definitely weren't jumpers and didn't have the stamina to event."

"I'd ridden a few horses but didn't have the love them, so we bought him — he was an old stallion and not overly expensive. And I'd ridden quite a few by Ramiro B and loved the feel. The opportunity came up to buy him. I'd always been friends with Nina, who has the Bolesworth estate, and the partnership grew out of that."

Oliver's parents Eve and Alan run the 100-horse stud. Next year the first main crop will be three-year-olds.

"We're hopefully breeding to lift the standard of breeding and everything is for sale," he says.

because Oliver got "a bit shy" when he saw how many people were lined up down the road last time — and Harthill Stud (see box).

Oliver loves eventing — the horses, the locations, the glamour — but he talked about making it financially viable long before the current prize-money debate. He reckons the sport of eventing needs an equivalent to the Formula 1 boss Bernie Ecclestone to shake it up. He wishes he could have a go but "you haven't got time running an event yard to have a haircut, let alone go and run another business."

But Oliver is also nervous about saying too much — he knows talking about making a living is unfashionable in eventing.



Oliver describes Black Tie II, an ex-racehorse from New Zealand, as 'not particularly scopey, but just a trier'

"I can shout and swear and laugh and cry easier than anyone and I'm so passionate about what I do. I don't just like the horses, I absolutely love the horses"

Oliver Townend

"Every time I've opened my mouth [to the press] someone drives up to see us [to tell him off]," he says. "I can shout and swear and laugh and cry easier than anyone and I'm so passionate about what I do. I don't just like the horses, I absolutely love the horses. If I have a good cross-country ride I burst into tears. Because I'm so passionate, the way I say things doesn't look good written down."

"I've had so many tellings off, but I'd love at the end of my career to have made a difference so I can say to my child — if I'm ever lucky enough to breed — yeah, go on, have a go at eventing. You'll have a nice lifestyle and make a good living. At the moment I wouldn't



1 Gadlas Farm house

recommend it — it's a nice lifestyle, but very few of us make a living."

Swapping cheques for cash
THE other eventers Oliver respects are Andrew Nicholson and William Fox-Pitt.

"You have to respect the ones that keep annoyingly beating you. From when I set up on my own at 22 to now, I've not been out of the top three in the country and nor have they."

He believes the up-and-coming crowd lack drive. He asked one younger rider if he was going to the fixture the next day and was told it was "too much like hard work".

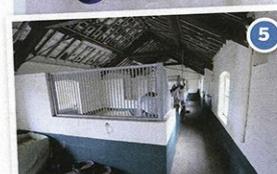
"So I thought, 'I don't need to worry about you then.' When I was 22, if there was an event for which I had a horse which could possibly get to the end, I'd have done everything I could to make him competitive and be there. I drove to events knowing I didn't have the money to put diesel in the wagon to get home. I'd swap prize cheques with the entries lady for start fees so I had cash for diesel. You've got to win then."

Now, he wants to win, but also to take less out of the horses. Much thought goes into entries — and if there is potential for horses to come out of an event sore, they don't go there, even if it is prestigious.

As I leave, Oliver's girlfriend of eight months, Esther Paul, is cooking a bubbling hot supper. At certain stages, he thought a relationship was "impossible", but she is, he says "very patient". She has a "proper job", rides for fun and puts up with the fact he is effectively away for seven months a year.

It might look like domestic bliss, but it'll be a long time before Oliver thinks he has made it — he is still the boy who wants more. H&H

> H&H VIP members can view an exclusive video of Oliver and Black Tie II at www.horseandhound.co.uk/olivertownendvideo. H&H VIP costs from £3.99 a month with a one-week free trial.



1 & 2 — Oliver bought 36-acre Gadlas Farm when he was just 25, having wanted to own a property all his life: "I was never really happy where I lived"; 3 & 4 — bridles and hats hanging in the immaculate tack room; 5 — stables inside the main old yard, where Oliver's top campaigners live. The grey is Ballahmor Class, recipient seventh in the CCI* at Tattersalls. More stabling is in American barns, with 46 boxes in all; 6 — the wash bay