

Oliver's army is here to stay



Oliver Townsend on Waterbeck Basil, just one of his 10 riders at Isleham. Five made the top two

Rising star Oliver Townsend makes his mark at Isleham.

Emma Collings reports

WITH a team of 10 horses, Oliver Townsend was the name on the commentator's lips at Isleham horse trials, and with good reason. The 22-year-old made a flying start to the season, with half his enticed horses occupying the top two slots on the score sheet in the intermediate and novice sections.

Just one man stood in the way of Oliver's army in the open intermediate class. Former Olympic Champion Matt Ryan guided Tim and Anne Pople's *Sight Of Hand* to a double clear, adding just 7.2 time penalties to his dressage of 36.7.

"He's so spooky that he often starts off on the scratchy side, but I'm really pleased with this. He's taken up where we left off last season," said Matt as he collected his prize.

With bits at Bramham and Balinidenick CIC** on the cards, the Australian has hopes for an international career for the 11-year-old.

"With the Olympics and World Cup as they are, he's such a good jumper that, even though he's only had three jumps, he might be the type of horse for the future," he said.

Several weeks of intermittent sleet and snow in East Angles left many wondering whether the event would be able to go ahead, but the festival put produced excellent going. Only parts A and B of the Punch Bowl Complex had to be excluded from the cross-country course.

Event president Cam Tompsett, who runs Isleham for charity this year raising more than £100,000 on his Whitehall Farm, was never in any doubt about the conditions.

"We've never cancelled yet," he said. "I told everyone we'd be on and we were. The ground never really freezes here. Just a thin crust on top, which we were able to break up with a roller."

The organisers' efforts did not go unnoticed by the riders, who were unanimous in their praise of the state of the cross-country course.

"Every year they've improved the take-offs and landings," said Matt Ryan. "It didn't feel too soft anywhere. All course-builders know that we need quality going if they want riders to come back, and we really appreciate their hard work."

With Oliver Townsend on the 13-year-old *Jungle Dive Blue* just 0.5cm off of Ryan, Daniel Leach made the most of one of three new rides by securing third place on *Upward Trend*. The 10-year-old grey was formerly the ride of Peggie French, who filled the fourth spot on What A Performance.

Oliver aims to restrict Emily Birch's *Jungle Dive Blue* to one-day events, having suffered a few falls at three days.

"He went well at the short-format Weston Park last year, but he's a one-day specialist," he said.

As one half of the only combination to go clear within the time cross-country, Daniel Leach expressed some reservations about the course. "I thought it was quite stiff for the first intermediate of the season and it needed some pretty accurate riding."

Having moved from Salisbury to Bury St Edmunds to ride for Richard Ames last November, the 21-year-old made a promising start for his new owner in his first year out of young riders. He also performed Richard's mare Delta Island to the runner-up spot in the intermediate section.

"She's a bit tense, I've got to work on getting more rhythm, particularly in the show jumping. She just needs to chill out a bit," said Daniel.

He once again found himself finishing behind the ubiquitous Mr Townsend, who had more than 200m in hand when winning the section on *Waterbeck Basil*, with Colina Allen and Major Promise in third.

Jill Towler's nine-year-old gelding *Waterbeck Basil* is fast becoming a favourite of his new rider. "He's a really classy horse, a machine," said Oliver. "He's very green still but I hope he'll be a nice horse for the future. We'll aim him at a three-star this year but not rush him. He'll probably go to Bramham, but that might be too early."

Now in his second year based in Market Harborough, Oliver seems determined to make his name to remember.

"Last year was a setting-up season, but this is serious now. We can do it," he said firmly.

His confidence was not misplaced. Earlier in the day, he landed novice sections G and H on *Matchplay II* and *Woodhouse Ben*, also finishing runner up on *Measure For Measure* in the latter.

His success led to a robbery from about never being in hand to collect his prize because he was off on his next horse. If this is the worst of his worries, then he must have made the trip home to Leicestershire a happy man.



Oliver didn't get it all his own way. Matt Ryan grabbed victory in the *Olan Sight Of Hand*.

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