

The HORSEHOUD interview



Oliver Townend leads Hands Down X, a seven-year-old by Master Imp who will be aimed at two-star

'Cloud nine? I just want to win more'

From £100,000 at Express Eventing to scooping the HSBC FEI Classics bonus, this has been one hell of a year for Oliver Townend. Yet it hasn't all been plain sailing. Martha Terry meets the man of the moment at his Shropshire base

NIGELLA LAWSON would have been proud. Two Aga-baked chocolate cakes cool on the granite kitchen island. Could this be the influence of a recent appearance on *Ready Steady Cook*? A smell of toast pervades as coffee is handed round in matching polka-dot mugs. It is the most un-Oliver Townend setting I could ever have imagined from the man who famously used to snack only on Haribo sweets during long days at events. And the world's top rider is eating breakfast and looking unusually relaxed.

"I'm nicer than I come across at events," says Oliver. "I've changed completely. I'm much happier as a person. I sat down all day at a dressage demonstration yesterday."

This is clearly something of an achievement. Oliver has had one whole competition-free week since his phenomenal season finished, and already has itchy feet.

"I was knackered, but I'm ready to go again," he says. "I will take a holiday, but only for everyone else's sake."

'I knew that I would win Badminton' EXTRAORDINARILY for such a prolific winner, it was only last year, at Houghton's CCI*, that Oliver won his first three-day event. He has since headed four more, including Badminton and Burghley, besides Express Eventing, to the total tune of around £350,000.

Although he was already top class, what has produced this invincible streak at the highest level?

"I felt I could win any old class on any old donkey, but it's a bit of a slippery slope if you're not winning the three-days," he explains. "It really bounced off the dressage side of Express Eventing. Suddenly, I was confident."

"People used to class me as a good jump rider who couldn't do dressage. Once I proved I could, I went into the ring thinking I couldn't give a shit what people think of me."

Although Oliver still won't accept he has made it on the international stage — "I don't



Oliver and team: Steven Smith, Rebecca Leaper, Jess Butler, Wraylon Roberts and Nicole Woodward

think I ever will" — he had something of a premonition before his annus mirabilis. "I knew in December that I would win Badminton with Flint [Curtis], there was no question in my mind," he said. "I couldn't see anything going wrong."

"Occasionally, I had to give myself a shake and say 'wake up and make sure you do make it happen'. But even so, I still don't feel like it was me who won it — it hasn't sunk in."

The team at home

A second factor in Oliver's form is building relationships with his rides and his team. "We've always sold horses so I never had long-term relationships with them — or anyone else!" he laughs, which he does a lot, loudly and self-deprecatingly. "But it's now all about the team. I've had my horses for longer. My nine members of staff get on well, they know me

and the horses inside out. Every morning I want to get out of bed and into the yard which makes a big difference from worrying about walking into a landlord or two members of staff who don't get on. It's all fallen into place."

This absence of landlords theme crops up again and again. It transpires that Oliver's dream was not actually to become the Federer of eventing, but to buy a farm. He did so last year, an early Victorian pile in Shropshire with 33 acres and stabling, where he lives with his father Alan and mother Eve. (So

Oliver doesn't really bake cakes or buy pretty crockery. It's his mum.)

The farm itself has been a major contributor to the new laid-back Oliver.

"Because I was so desperate to find my own base, I went through various jobs that weren't always the nicest experiences," he explains. "It was fantastic in that I learnt so much about horses and life, but it did make me very driven and I came across as a person I didn't really like. Now all the pressures and horrible things going round in my head have disappeared."

"I can be tough on myself and still smile at people, whereas before when I was tough on myself, I was ready to chop someone else's head off as well."

'Horses aren't machines' INDEED, Oliver seems atypically stoical about the two notable black marks on this season's

card — Flint's failure to complete the Europeans and Carousel Quest's show jumping cricket score at Pau — because he knew beforehand that Flint was not on form and that Quest was petrified of Pau's stadium.

"Events aren't machines," he says. "Quest has been fantastic — he's finished in the top eight in three four-stars this year, winning one."

Breaking through eventing's ranks without the proverbial silver spoon is part of Oliver's make-up. He started out five years ago with just £1,400, no

car and no horsebox. It has taken time for him to feel accepted as the "black sheep" of the British team.

For Oliver, riding is a business. He met his current business partner, Andrew Cawthray, a successful businessman and fellow Yorkshireman, at Allerton Park in 2006, when Cawthray was looking for a rider for a young horse of his. This is one relationship Oliver will fight to make last.

The first horse Oliver bought for Cawthray sold for double what they paid for it a short time later. The second sold for £100,000, four times its price tag three months earlier. Their best coup sold for £250,000, six months after they paid £38,000. Who says you can't make money out of horses?

If you ask Oliver to choose money or medals, the answer comes back immediately.

"I can't live without money," he says. "Anyone who can say 'medals' is in a lot more fortunate position than I am. I love riding horses more than ever, but I run a professional business within a still fairly unprofessional sport. There seems to be this thing against people who are happy to speak about wanting to win or earn a living out of the sport. It's a load of crap."

"If we stick with the old English attitude of 'we're all here for a jolly good time and we're all best friends', the sport is not going to move forwards."

And when I'm on a team, I'll respect Yogi [Breisner, British Eventing performance manager], but I'm riding for myself, not the others. If my success helps the team to win gold, fantastic."

Turning round chuck-outs ANOTHER thing that rankles is the perception that he is hard on his horses.

"This upsets me more than you could ever imagine," he says. "Being competitive does not go hand-in-hand with being tough. They say jockey AP McCoy is tough, but if he's riding one that can't be bullied or won't be pushed, he won't push. It's just being a horseman."

"Touch wood, we've got a very, very, very low injury rate, considering the amount of horses we run."

The great Flint is daydreaming when I peer

Oliver looks on as Wraylon Roberts schools ODT French Connection, another 2010 prospect



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Oliver at home in the Shropshire farmhouse he bought last year

To put one injury rumour to rest, Flint Curtis and Carousel Quest have both returned from their continental excursions in good nick and will run next season.

"We'll take each day as it comes next season with those boys," says Oliver. "They're complete professionals, but as good as my best mates and hopefully they will live here forever."

But he hasn't finished with his detractors. "Sometimes I am disgusted by seeing the harm people do working in on the flat," he says. "If they warm up like that at an event, what are they doing at home? It may be that I've succeeded on other people's chuck-outs and they think there must be some trick. I've just tried to manage them correctly."

"Fissy [French, ex-girlfriend] would stand up for me — she's spent more time in a school with me than anyone."

The horses do indeed seem relaxed and happy. Some, bright and sparky, are capering round a paddock in excitement at their rider's photoshoot in a neighbouring field. Others are standing quietly in spick and span stables.

The great Flint is daydreaming when I peer

Oliver's winnings* this year

Express Eventing **£100,000**

Mitsubishi Motors Badminton **£60,000**

Land Rover Burghley **£55,000**

HSBC FEI Classics **\$150,000 (£92,000)**

2009 TOTAL **£307,000** (excluding 24 one-day wins)

Kentucky **\$80,000 (£48,800)**

Rolex grand slam **\$350,000 (£213,000)**

POTENTIAL TOTAL **£568,800**

*Prize-money goes to the horse's owner. How much the rider receives depends on their arrangement. Of the above, the only payment to go directly to Oliver is the HSBC FEI Classics and the Rolex grand slam, if he wins

What they say about Oliver

Andrew Cawthray — business partner, owner of Carousel Quest and Neo Du Breuil

All champions, in sport or business, are their own men, and Oliver is just that. He has a phenomenal eye for a horse and was always going to get to this position. Burghley was a dream, but at Pau, in desperate conditions, he rode both horses magnificently, with absolute maturity. I think that was his best performance to date.

Yogi Breisner — eventing performance manager

Oliver has been part of the World Class programme for a number of years. He's always been hungry for success, talented and professional. This year, with two fantastic horses, everything has come together and he's had an incredible season.

Tracie Robinson — British team dressage trainer

Oliver's achievements have been exceptional and his dressage has improved beyond recognition. It is all down to his hard work, determination and a genuine desire to succeed.

Mike Etherington-Smith — British Eventing chief executive

What Oliver has achieved this year is outstanding. It is great news for him, besides helping to raise the profile of the sport. He will go to Kentucky with an exceptional opportunity to win the Rolex grand slam. As a personal achievement and for the sport it would be terrific for him to win as we look ahead to the opportunities that World Equestrian Games and London 2012 will present to us.

THREE RISING STARS

ODT Master Rose, 9yo bay
Breeding: Master Imp x Skyrose
Best result: 3rd Blenheim CIC** 8-9yo
Aim: Badminton

Hands Down X, 7yo bay
Breeding: Master Imp x Errigal Rose
Best result: first in first intermediate
Aim: two-star

Neo Du Breuil, 8yo grey
Breeding: French-bred Anglo Arab; Quater De Plape x Bon Vent D'Astarac
Best result: 2nd Pau CIC**
Aim: late three-star

over his door, his big white ears pricked and lower lip drooping.

What next? WHEN Oliver says he feels much older than his 26 years, it's hardly surprising. He's got his farm and more trophies than most eventers could expect in a whole career.

Alan Townend says that his only child has always been "five years ahead of himself".

But might his early fulfilment trigger a dulling of that fierce determination? Unlikely.

"People always used to ask whether I wanted to win Badminton or Burghley," he says. "I would just say 'both', and now I want to win both again. The farm has come quickly, too, but that proves that I can do the same with another venture."

Short-term, there is the unfinished business of the Rolex grand slam to contend for in Kentucky next spring. He has not yet decided who will be primed for the bid to win the \$350,000 (£213,000) bonus, but hinted that it may not be Flint or Quest, who are in their mid-teens. He says he is "desperate" for a new horse to fill the gap when those stalwarts retire.

Long-term, Oliver may even emulate Mark Todd in achieving top eventing and show jumping honours. As a boy, Oliver won a class at the Horse of the Year Show and produced a Doncaster Sales purchase, Gold Ringer, to grade

A and small grand prix level as well as advanced eventing.

Like everything else, his career path boiled down to finance. "I didn't pick eventing but you can make a very normal horse into a good, competitive event horse. You can't make a normal show jumper into a top-class show jumper," he explains. "I would love to go show jumping eventually again. It's a side of me I've not quite let go of."

"The top boys will think it's a joke as they only ever see us show jumping tired eventers on the third day. But I'd put my neck out and have a jumper one day. I've got a good man [Cawthray] now, so it's my choice whether I do it."

That's the thing about Oliver. Far more modest than he has been portrayed, he can't let one win sink in before he is striving to achieve the next. How does he wind down? He doesn't. He has sacrificed his party-animal reputation in pursuit of more success. He is charming, in a spade is a spade sort of way, but simply doesn't believe in basking in the fruits of the hottest run of form since Pippa Funnell won the Rolex Grand Slam a decade ago.

"People think I should be on cloud nine, but I'm not," he says. "All Badminton and Burghley have done is make me want to win more. I've become even more focused." H&H



Neo Du Breuil — our cover star — was second in the Pau CIC** (22-25 October)