

French/Townend duo sweeps the board

Piggy French and Oliver Townend dominate proceedings again, with Phoebe Buckley also on good form. Julie Harding reports

PHOEBE Buckley probably guessed that she didn't have Poplar Park's advanced intermediate section completely in the bag. Having notched up a respectable three-phase score of 34.9 on Val Gingell's The Busker to occupy the top of the leaderboard for some time, Phoebe could only wait and watch as Piggy French and Oliver Townend raced around the 19-fence track, following each other in the dying stages of the competition.

First Piggy crossed the line, within the 5min 19sec optimum, to complete on 32.1 aboard her one-day specialist Chicago II, and then Oliver and his World Games partner Flint Curtis sprinted through the finish, 2sec inside the time, which left them with a three-phase score of 32.9.

"Bloody Piggy and Oli," laughed Phoebe. "I went like stink across country. What's a girl got to do to beat these two?"

And it wasn't a case of being beaten just once by the French-Townend double act. Phoebe found herself in the bridesmaid's slot in the open intermediate section courtesy of Mr Townend, who took first place with Northraces Best Wishes, leaving Phoebe and Dr Polly Taylor's big jumping 15hh grey mare Little Tiger, by Java Tiger, four points in arrears.

If Piggy French looked fairly satisfied at the prize-giving, it probably had something to do with possible repercussions after Poplar.

"Oliver would have been simply unbearable if he'd won all three sections," she stated with reference to the fact that her boyfriend secured victory in the sole intermediate section as well.

Kitty Boggis found herself way ahead in the advanced intermediate after the first phase with new ride Coup De Coeur, who last year crashed spectacularly into the lake at Lexington with previous pilot William Fox-Pitt.

Kitty has spent the winter familiarising herself with the 16.3hh gelding by doing flatwork training with Henriette Anderson. Coup De Coeur went on to notch up four faults in the show jumping, followed by a "steady" cross-country clear.

"We were getting to know each other on the cross-country and when we do I'll be getting more of a wobble on," said Kitty.

Only three in this section of 15 runners incurred faults across country. One of these was Andrew Nicholson, who added 20pen to his scorecard when Silbury Hill stopped at fence 15, the rails/ditch and step-up, one of three new fences.

The new obstacle that caused the most consternation, however, was number 13, a bounce of gates. Indeed, some riders were so aghast to see such a test on a track so early on in the season that they voiced their concerns to rider



Last season's Shropshire slam winner Piggy French keeps a clean sheet to take the AI on Chicago II



Phoebe Buckley finishes third in the AI on The Busker. She was also runner-up in the OI

rep Oliver Townend. His dialogue with organiser and course-designer Jim Hardwick prompted a groundline to be added and the two fences to be painted different colours.

In the event, everyone's fears proved unfounded and the fences jumped well, although even some leading names took the scenic route.

"It didn't look like a nice fence to me," said Oliver, "but the mark of good course-design is a fence that prompts discussion but goes on to jump OK."

Oliver's winning ride in intermediate section M was Daisy Crazy, a horse he rated so highly after seeing her on the circuit with Rachel Corbin that he purchased her just four days before Poplar.

"I tried and failed to buy her six months ago,"

he explained. "In the interim she had been putting in a few stops on the cross-country. The mare felt very good today, although a touch too careful, and I think she needs a few runs to get more confident."

Andrew Nicholson enjoyed a reversal of fortune in this intermediate class, piloting Paul Ridgeon's six-year-old Pasternak gelding Trafalgar into the runner-up slot.

Oliver's open intermediate winner, Northraces Best Wishes, another mare, is part of Judy

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Phoebe Buckley

Graham's dynasty of home-bred horses. Her grandam was Troi Joy, with whom Jane Holderness-Roddam was long-listed for the Montreal Olympics, while her dam was That's Best, who carried Angela Tucker around Burghley.

Oliver won the British Novice Championship at the Festival of British Eventing in 2005 with the mare's full-brother Best Of Spirits, while Best Wishes, who used to be competed by Leslie Law, has only just returned to the competitive fray following an 18-month lay-off with a tendon injury.

J-P Sheffield and Crown Farm Consort finished third in the open intermediate. Dressage leaders Laurence Hunt and Phoebus failed to finish, eliminated for missing out fence 17.

Poplar Park ran two full days of competition, able to fit in a handful of those who wanted to reroute from a cancelled Tweseldown. The crowds thronged to this site near the sea, the sun shone constantly and temperatures touched 15°C. Riders declared the course good and the ground pure perfection. What more could new organiser Jim Hardwick want? H&H