

Ready to take



Oliver Townend and Sharon Hunt, with Oliver's ride for WEG, Flint Curtis

on the world

Oliver Townend and Sharon Hunt are young, ambitious and gunning for the World Equestrian Games. **LUCY HIGGINSON** and **PIPPA ROOME** meet the up-and-coming stars who caught the selectors' eyes at Badminton



Oliver goes clear inside the time to finish 12th on Topping at his first Badminton last year

"I'm a bit sick of being a rising star," said Oliver Townend last year. Then at Badminton last month, he and fellow young eventer Sharon Hunt burst through the door they had been knocking on so loudly the year before, achieving top six placings, with Oli third and the best Brit.

Now Oli, 23, has been picked for the World Equestrian Games (WEG) and Sharon, 28, is joint first reserve. And though opposites in many ways – he is a dealer's son who has been selected on a horse he has ridden for just three months; she comes from unhorsey stock and has produced her top horse from a four-year-old – they share one ambition: to be the next generation of British medal-winners.

In his local pub, at least, Oli has most definitely "arrived". He is greeted like a local hero: "What's Prince Edward like then, Oli?"

"Well, we're peas in a pod aren't we..." Yet Oli says he was mentally prepared to find himself not on the squad for WEG, reasoning: "It's quite nice to have a horse you could win some money on at Burghley." Prize-money, and the pressing need to earn it, is something Oli talks about unashamedly. He is a young man building a career up from nothing. He has not been able to start out from a yard loaned to him by Mum and Dad, and he is aware that his sport is peppered with riders competing on different terms.

"Not many of them really have to make a living from it," he says. "They pretend to, they cover their costs and they work very hard to get there. But they do it with financial support."

Has he got his Badminton winnings ear-marked for something in particular? "The overdraft. It came at a very useful time."

Based in Leicestershire in lush Farnie country, there is no mistaking Oli's accent and no nonsense views. It is pure Yorkshire. This is his third season in Leicestershire, after a three-year stint as Kenneth Clawson's stable jockey [British eventing team show jumping trainer]. Now he has been joined by his parents (his father, Alan, helps him work the young horses each day) and fellow eventer and girlfriend Piggy French.

It is a great set up – Oli's London-based landlords have converted an old

indoor school into an American barn and put in a horse walker. Besides an assortment of hunt jumps scattered around, the farm has 100-plus acres of headland for canter work, and a point-to-point yard has gallops nearby.

Oli is a prolific competitor on the one-day circuit and it is not uncommon to find him competing eight horses in a weekend. But this may change. After Badminton, he sent 10 horses back to their owners – to make room,

he hopes, for better ones. Did his result there shape that decision? "I was thinking about it before Badminton. I've had a couple of serious bashes [falls] lately that had set me thinking about a few of them."

"When I started out on my own, I had nothing to lose, so I was smiley and chatty and horses came quite easily," he says. "The next step's going to be that much more difficult – stepping it up a gear to find really good horses."

Oli has begun making a name for himself as a guy who can get a tune out of a horse where others have failed.

But before anyone says the same of Edward Nicholson's Flint Curtis, the horse now ear-marked for WEG and who had four lady riders before Oli, he comments: "He's not a particularly difficult horse. His form doesn't really match the horse – he hadn't won a class [since being a novice] until this season."

On top of sponsorship from Toggi, supplement firm TRM and feed from Dodson & Horrell, producing young horses to sell on is an important part of Oliver's

For the muck heap? Oliver with girlfriend Piggy French

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business. And it's one he hopes to develop further, especially while the sport – to his mind – remains "not sponsor-friendly". For this, he holds eventing's administration to account. "It needs to be more businesslike," he asserts, and urges eventing to take a leaf from show jumping's book.

"Why can't we have a horse called 'Tesco main aisle' if that'll attract more sponsorship? And we'll have to wear our black jackets [for the show jumping phase] while jumpers can wear their sponsor's colours, and so on."

"We need to be more dynamic and forward thinking," he continues, "and find more sponsors outside the equestrian field. Owners need to be able to do more than just win their costs back when their horse wins a class."

Horse trials, feels Oli, have too much of an old-school upper-crust image. The double-barrelled surnames and aristocratic roots of leading riders "won't attract ordinary people to the sport". Perhaps a boy from the outskirts of Huddersfield can help redress the balance.

Prodding the establishment where he finds it wanting is something Oli doesn't flinch over. He is grateful for the training help he gets as a member of the World Class Potential squad, but points out that, since news of his WEG selection broke "they haven't given me a ring yet to say well done".

As anyone could tell from the emotion on his face as he crossed the finish line at Badminton, doing so well there meant the world to him.

"Being best of the British was almost as good as coming third," he agrees. "Especially beating William Fox-Pitt, who's so established."

What are his thoughts about William withdrawing Tamarillo after the dressage to save him for WEG?

"Well, I can see why he did it. But that comment about his dressage mark [William admitted that if he'd been leading he'd have been tempted to carry on] made him out to be a bit of a spoilt brat. There's nothing wrong with coming sixth at Badminton."

"On the other hand," he laughs, "I'd probably be ten grand poorer if he'd carried on."



Oliver with Flint Curtis: "He's not particularly difficult. His form didn't really match the horse"



Oliver at his yard: "The next step's going to be stepping it up a gear to find really good horses"

Before eventing took over properly, Oli show jumped on a young rider team, and has ridden in a couple of grands prix. Ask him what attributes he most admires in other riders and, interestingly, he doesn't mention any eventers. He names German Marcus Ehning, the world's leading show jumper, for his "quietness and style". Has his own show jumping experience given him an edge in eventing?

"It's definitely helpful, but I still look at the video from Badminton and cringe. But you've got to remember you're on a tired eventer, not a jumper."

He also admires Carl Hester's dressage riding – "he's a cut above" – and jockey AP McCoy for his "dedication and constant will to win – which, hopefully, I'm not too far off."

Was that drive and will to win behind the wallop Oli gave his other four-star ride, Topping as he battled to stave off time-faults coming into the last fence at Badminton this year?

"Topping's perfectly capable of putting in a dirty stop when he's getting tired," explains Oliver. "That's why he got a wallop."

For Suffolk-based Sharon Hunt, competitiveness is something she's acquired rather than been born with.

"You've got to be a perfectionist, but things don't always go right with horses," she says. "In the past two or three years I've become more competitive because I've felt more confident."

She certainly achieved it at Badminton, finishing sixth with Tankers Town (Jasper). "I'm chuffed to bits. I wasn't sure beforehand if we were both fit enough," says Sharon, who broke her collar-bone earlier this season. "I felt more pressure in the show jumping than I've ever done, but I know Jasper's very careful."

Sharon has produced Jasper herself from a youngster, like most of her rides. "He nearly died as a four-year-old – he had strangles and purpura and he was coming out three times a day to inject him," says Sharon.

He used to buck Sharon off as she was mounting – "he was sharp little thing" – but they completed Badminton and Burghley in 2004 and 2005, with their best result before