

Eventing

Oliver Townend: 'I'm lucky to have survived that fall'



Oliver's Rolex Grand Slam dream ended with a crashing fall from Ashdale Cruise Master

COVER STORY



OLIVER TOWNEND called for all riders to wear Point Two air jackets as he recovered from a horrendous fall at Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event on Saturday that put paid to his hopes of winning eventing's Rolex Grand Slam (see report, page 28).

Oliver's second horse Ashdale Cruise Master left a leg behind at the first element of fence 12, The Hollow — rails that led to two steps — somersaulted and knocked out his rider.

The fence had been made with frangible pins that did not break and had caused two other horse falls — Kristi Nunnink with R-Star and Tara Ziegler with Buckingham Place.

"It was a cruncher of a fall and I can't remember much about it after take-off," said Oliver. "You wouldn't want too many like that and I'm lucky to have survived."

"I wouldn't be here now if I hadn't been wearing my Point Two air jacket — and I think everyone should wear one now. It's a massive step forward for the safety of our sport."

Oliver also credited his Champion hat.

After a night in hospital, Oliver was discharged to see William Fox-Pitt win at Kentucky and to check on his unscathed horse.

"I feel like I'm going through a rough period at this point," said the rider. "I am disappointed, but we'll live to fight another day."

When asked what had happened, Oliver said Ashdale Cruise Master just made a mistake.

"He was going unbelievably — I don't know him that well, but I don't believe he's going to make too many mistakes like that in his career," he said.

"Perhaps he spotted the steps on landing, perhaps he didn't get high enough — he just made a mistake."

Such is the popularity of the air jackets in eventing that 43 of the 53 starters at Kentucky wore Point Twos, according to managing director Lee Middleton.

"And four others wore Hit Air jackets [a rival to Point Two]. So 90 per cent of riders were

wearing air jackets," he said.

Since Mr Middleton released details of the first round of testing on the Point Two (news, 1 April) he has entered into discussions with the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) to create an industry standard for air jackets.

"Not a lot else has happened though," he said of a lack of further progress with British Eventing and the FEI.

"But an industry standard is needed before anything else happens."

Meanwhile, Oliver will not compete for 21 days after his fall, forcing his withdrawal from Badminton (30 April-4 May).

And his luck failed to improve after the event. Despite having broken four ribs, his sternum, collarbone and shoulder, the tough Yorkshireman spent Sunday night sleeping on the floor of Chicago O'Hare airport — along with William Fox-Pitt and British eventing team manager Yogi Breisner — after bad weather in the US delayed his flight home.