

Townend and Wilson carve up the honours

Oliver Townend and Nicola Wilson share the top spot in the advanced — after a double protest — and then take three more sections between them.

Charlotte Agnew reports

CONTROVERSY surrounded the advanced section at the early season running of Witton Castle Horse Trials last weekend. For while Oliver Townend coolly reflected on yet another win, little did he know that Nicola Wilson (née Tweedle) was in the process of filing an objection.

It transpired that as she and Skiver passed fence three on the cross-country, a spectator's dog took an exceptional dislike to the pair, and dislodging itself from its unfortunate owner, gave chase.

"It was barking and snapping at his front feet before the hanging log, where we nearly fell," she said. "Then it raced down the hill in hot pursuit."

Luckily, the drama ended as hastily as it began, just before fence seven, when the enthusiastic canine tripped itself up, thus allowing itself to be pounced upon and dragged to safety — where it was allegedly held to ransom for £20. This "interesting" episode, as Nicola described it, meant that a number of time-penalties were



Nicola Wilson and Skiver shake off problems with a loose dog to finish equal first in the advanced class

deducted from this experienced combination's score, propelling them into pole position. This in turn resulted in a protest from Oli.

After much debate, steward David Reid came to a diplomatic conclusion by announcing them first equal, with the prize-money topped up so that both riders went home happy, and, as Nick Burd commented, "knowing that British Eventing listened to them".

There couldn't have been a greater contrast between the two victors. Skiver, now 15 years old, has retired from three-days following an impressive eight years of advanced level competition, while Oli's mount Eldmire Foxy Lady was having her first run at this level.

But the mare showed her talent by producing an excellent dressage score of 29.2 — which was only equalled by John Marsden and Shillelagh Gold — and Oliver commented that she "gets better and better on the flat".

Two poles down in the second phase brought the competition closer, although a characteristically competitive cross-country time ensured that the Bramham-bound Eldmire Foxy Lady would be well at the top of the leaderboard.

Other than Nicola Wilson, the only other competitor Oliver had to worry about was in fact himself, with his second ride ODT Iron Brew, who eventually claimed third place. Owned by Andrew Cawthray, the 10-year-old gelding was bought this winter from Nick Turner, who had produced him quietly, and Oliver certainly reaped the benefits of this by jumping a rare double clear.

The show jumping proved as influential as ever at Witton Castle, with bitter cold and damp conditions not helping the ground, and a mere 10 clears were recorded out of the substantial section. Among these were Austin O'Connor and the experienced French campaigner Hobby Du Mée, who was bought last year by the Davieses for Austin to ride, and who will be aimed at Badminton this year.

Similarly, Irish rider Louise Lyons produced a lovely clear aboard her Badminton-bound Watership Down, which kept her just ahead of Caroline Powell and the first of her two rides in this section, Mac Macdonald.

Caroline and Mac Macdonald were just one of the combinations who suffered a scary moment at the carefully positioned hanging log at fence five, which produced a lot of green faces from riders walking the course. Positioned on an extremely steep slope, the airy log was followed by a wall, with one long stride to a large house with a drop at the bottom of the hill.

A philosophical Caroline saw the positive side though, and admitted that Mac Macdonald certainly "sharpened up" after that.

Oliver Townend and Nicola Wilson not only dominated the most prestigious class at Witton, but most of the other sections as well.

Nicola stole the limelight in intermediate section A aboard Acquisitor, as well as in the open intermediate with Lady Milnes Coates's Mr Nickleby.

Nicola said: "I'm over the moon, particularly because Mr Nickleby was quite bruised last

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COURSE CHAT

■ AS well as the half a dozen lorries pulled out over the weekend, help was also on hand for Louise Lyon's disabled owner Laurie March, whose buggy got stuck in the mud.

■ "TRUE amateur" novice rider Andrew Dangerfield was thrilled with his sixth placing aboard Bon Bon II, whom he bought as a 40th birthday present for himself three years ago, and has coaxed through the grades himself.

■ LOUISA Milne Horne and Ian Stark both had a "blonde" (or perhaps grey) moment in the show jumping, as they paused mid-course to recollect the route. Louisa was very indignant to discover that this small memory lapse had resulted in four time-faults.

year, having somersaulted at the intermediate championships at Gatcombe."

The horse showed he is definitely back on form by producing one of only five clear show jumping rounds in this section to shoot into the lead ahead of Austin O'Connor and Pocket Rocket III.

Pocket Rocket added just 2.6 time-penalties to his dressage score on his debut run of the season. Austin is so enamoured by this little horse that he also has a yearling filly by his sire, Future Role, at home. Not to be outdone, his other British-bred ride in this section — the Jumbo-sired Memphis — clinched 10th prize.

Intermediate section B went to Oliver Townend, this time with Waterview, who finished six marks ahead of Polly Stockton and the New Zealand import Estrada. Polly also played bridesmaid to Nicola Wilson in section A riding Miss Haversham, a success witnessed by the mare's local owner/breeder, Mafra Smithers.

Lauren Shannon rode to victory in her second under-21 open intermediate in two weeks, this time riding Zero Flight. With only two clear show jumping rounds in the section the one coloured pole she lowered proved immaterial. The male/female contest initiated by Nicola and Oliver was continued in this section, as Lauren fought off the challenge from Ben Hobday and No Regrets II.

This combination produced an outstanding dressage of 25.7, but several show jumps down meant they relinquished their lead. However, this was not enough for Laura Grace Johnson to move out of third spot aboard the diminutive but consistent grey mare Elías Drum. H&H



Eldmire Foxy Lady makes an impressive advanced debut for Oliver Townend by sharing top spot



Intermediate runner-up Polly Stockton (Estrada)



Under-21 national champion Ben Hobday takes second place in the under-21 OI on No Regrets II

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