



We lived across the fields from the Whitakers, but I always knew I wanted to event

**Eventer Oliver Townend is one of Britain's most successful sportsmen — but he remains a controversial figure. He tells Eleanore Kelly about the challenges he has faced**



Oliver in action on Flint Curtis, the horse he fell in love with at Bramham

## Oliver Townend: bad boy or misunderstood?

There can't be many pre-teens who have their career path drawn up, but 26-year-old Yorkshireman Oliver Townend — he prefers Oliver to "Oli" — showed his single-mindedness from the start.

He grew up as an only son in Huddersfield. "My family might have looked a bit 'hillbilly' to some, but we were hardworking. We had to be — there wasn't much money about," muses Oliver.

It was Oliver's father who interested him in horses. Alan Townend, a milkman and farm

machinery dealer, dealt in horses as a sideline. He was an experienced eventer who had successfully completed Burghley. Mother Eve competed side-saddle at county level.

Oliver decided from an early age that his future lay in eventing.

"We lived across the fields from the Whitakers and my competition career started in pony show jumping, but I always knew I wanted to event," he says.

Oliver had his first taste of the "big time" at 11, when he took the junior newcomers show jumping title at the Horse of the Year Show on



A lap of honour for Flint Curtis and Oliver after their Badminton win this year

Cool Mule. This pony was bought for just £825 because he was tricky and sharp. Two years later, Cool Mule and Oliver were contesting the pony European Eventing Championships.

Oliver is renowned for his ability to get the best out of difficult horses.

"Because Dad dealt in horses and ponies, I was put on anything and everything. It was tough seeing the good ones sold, but it made me realise that you had to have a business mind to pay the bills. I also learned to make something out of any horse, which has certainly helped," he explains.

Oliver enjoyed the show jumping circuit, but decided pursuing his eventing ambitions was more realistic.

"Jumpers were expensive at the top level. Dad used to buy from Doncaster sales and it was easier to turn a Thoroughbred into an eventer," he says.

That said, he did manage to turn several "cheapies" into grade A show jumpers, including Gold Ringer, a Thoroughbred bought at Doncaster.

Education wasn't high on Oliver's priorities and he remembers his school routine with a wry smile: "Mum would drop me at the school gates, I'd wave goodbye, then walk up the road to where Dad was

waiting for me. We'd spend the day buying horses and riding!"

After leaving school, Oliver set about gaining experience. A variety of jobs included working in Ireland for Paul Donovan and Carol Gee and riding out for national hunt trainer Mouse Morris. He spent six months with Christopher Bartle at the Yorkshire Riding Centre before a brief spell working with his father.

The next 31/2 years were spent working for British eventing team show jumping trainer Kenneth Clawson in Leicestershire.

"I learnt a lot, but I decided to go it alone on my 21st birthday. I left Ken's with no horses, no car and £1,400 to my name," says Oliver.

But this no-nonsense Yorkshireman didn't let this get in the way. In fact, when you would imagine he'd cite this year's Badminton victory as his greatest achievement, he opts for setting up on his own with girlfriend Piggy French.

The couple are no longer together, but Oliver speaks fondly of Piggy.

"She's one of my closest friends and was with me through a lot of highs and lows.

"I had to make my name, so I rode lots of average horses and had wins most weeks. If at the start of the week a horse wasn't on target to compete at the weekend, I'd work every daylight hour to make darn



I do have regrets that I may have upset people on the way



Carousel Quest, one of Oliver's two short-listed rides for the European Championships



Oliver and Golden Hue at Luhmühlen

sure that not only was it ready, but that it was ready to win."

Oliver readily agrees that it was this competitive spirit and hunger for success that tarnished his reputation as a "good sportsman" in many people's eyes.

"I can understand now how people saw me as a tough, hard swine, who didn't care who he trod on or upset along the way. I was pretty young and all I knew was that I wanted to go places and be financially comfortable," he says. "I grew up knowing only too well how hard life is without money. At the time, I decided I couldn't have it all. If I wanted horses, some money and good results, I was going to make enemies.

"When I left Ken's, I had very little in the world other than grit, determination and my riding ability. I was forced to ring round begging for rides on anything. At the time, to me, it wasn't poaching rides, it was simply survival — sink or swim.

"Now, I realise I might have gone about it a bit differently and I do have regrets that I may have upset people on the way."

Badminton victor Flint Curtis had had seven

riders and had never won before Oliver took him on.

"I'd been watching him for a while and when I saw him at Bramham in 2005, I fell in love," says Oliver. "I do love horses. In truth, the hard image isn't really me and, deep down, it does get to me when people say things about me. That said, I'm a Yorkshire lad and I often got the impression that people didn't take to me because I was the 'wrong breed' for eventing.

"It's that snobby image eventing needs to shake off to move forward. It's better than it was, but I am aware that certain people don't like my open manner in press conferences. I haven't had any media training, but, to be fair, I don't think those who have necessarily benefit from it. I just speak the truth and we need to promote the sport to a wider public and show it's not just for those with rich, privileged backgrounds."

It was Oliver's third place at Badminton in 2006 that put his name in lights. His success and drive impressed Andrew Cawthray, who approached



We need to show eventing's not just for those with rich, privileged backgrounds



Oliver on Waterview, one of his friend and business partner Andrew Cawthray's horses

Oliver at a novice event and asked if he could walk the course with him.

Andrew has since become the owner of several horses and a business partner and friend. He and Oliver have invested in and produced some classy horses, many of which have been sold worldwide.

"I'd love to keep all the good ones, but I have to keep my feet on the ground," says Oliver, pragmatically. "Selling these horses helped me buy a farm. I love eventing, but building up a successful business is the main thing that gets me out of bed in the morning."

Now settled at his base in Shropshire, Oliver carries plenty of responsibility on his young shoulders. As well as the realities of his mortgage and tax bill and wages to find for his all-important team, he has 38 horses in training "and youngsters in the fields".

The choice between glory and financial responsibility may come into question before the forthcoming European Championships. Oliver has been listed on Flint Curtis and Carousel Quest and it is mostly his decision over which horse to ride.

Being part of a team and riding for his country means a lot to him, but Oliver is also in contention for two of eventing's most lucrative prizes — the Rolex Grand Slam and HSBC Classics. The Grand Slam, for instance, offers \$350,000 if any rider manages to win at Burghley, Badminton and Lexington consecutively.

"If one of my horses was injured, I'd have to choose between the Europeans and Burghley. It would be a hard decision because the Grand Slam must be every event rider's aim," he says. "I'm not afraid to speak my mind on this subject and there isn't enough money in eventing as it is. Incentives such as the Rolex Grand Slam, HSBC Classics and Express Eventing give the sport publicity."

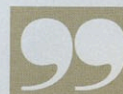
Although he took the £100,000 prize, Oliver does acknowledge that Express Eventing needs improvement.

"The idea was fantastic and it could be amazing. As long as the organisers learn from their mistakes it could be a huge promotion of eventing, although the tragic accident with Call Again Cavalier was really upsetting.

"There should be a similar atmosphere to Olympia, where 8,000 people enjoy top show jumping and it's really buzzing, but I think the ticket prices were too high. I'd charge everyone £5, just to get people through the gate."

All being well, Oliver is looking forward to the European Championships.

"Britain needs to step up a gear now. We've been successful for so many years, but other nations are catching us fast. I don't think we should be content with anything except the top spot," he says. "We



I don't think the British team should be content with anything except the top spot

have got a fight on our hands. The Germans are a serious force and their success in Hong Kong has added a vital ingredient — confidence. The French have plenty going for them and I can see the Irish posing a major threat soon."

Oliver believes a better breeding policy would put Britain back on top.

"It takes time, money and effort, but what the Funnells and Donal Barnwell have done in a relatively short time proves it's possible," he points out.

He may have strong views about his sport, but Oliver wouldn't want to do anything else: "I thrive on pressure and believe it's part of making you a successful competitor. The higher the pressure, the more level-headed I become. I went into the show jumping at Badminton this year knowing I'd done all the preparation I could and it was just a case of putting the plan into action."

As with many successful people, Oliver is a complex character. He's a mixture of drive and self-interest, balanced by an understanding of people and horses. He's no "bad boy", but he's not yet content, which might be a good thing for the future of eventing in Britain. His drive and ambition could just make Oliver Townend a sporting legend.



An ambition achieved: Oliver with the Badminton trophy