



Going for Gold

Carol Burns meets Leicestershire Olympic hopeful Oliver Townend as he awaits his fate in Beijing 2008

The summer promises to be an exciting - and busy one for Leicestershire eventing champion Oliver Townend.

It began in May when he secured a trip to Beijing Olympics with Coup de Cour as a member of the first reserve team. Announced in May, preparations began in earnest.

But whatever the Olympic outcome, Oliver will round his season off nicely with one of the biggest horse events of the calendar with the world famous Burghley Horse Trials in September at the renowned Elizabethan estate in neighbouring Lincolnshire.

For those new to the sport (like me), eventing is a combination of Dressage, Jumping and Cross-Country tests and is the most complex of the three Equestrian disciplines. It requires years of training for the team - the horse and its rider - to be able to perform the exercises of skill, speed, endurance, and jumping of obstacles. In each of the three Equestrian events - Dressage, Jumping and Eventing - the aim is to create a harmonious partnership between horse and rider.

Historically, eventing was the military mission of a cavalry officer that had to deliver a message through enemy lines and back to his base and the history of Equestrian sport dates back more than 2,000 years, to when the Greeks introduced Dressage training to prepare their horses for war.

It continued to develop as a military exercise through

the Middle Ages, with the Three Day Event - which included Dressage, Cross Country and Show Jumping tests - designed to reflect the range of challenges horses faced outside its traditional army base.

In its modern form, Equestrian owes much to its inclusion in the Olympic Games, which led to the creation of the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) in 1921. Through its development of international competitions, the FEI has helped to spread the popularity of horse sport outside its traditional army base.

The Equestrian disciplines are unique among Olympic sports, in the sense that men and women compete on the same terms and horse and rider are both declared Olympic medal winners.

Oliver's father, himself a former eventer, inspired his love of horses and the sport and is proud of his son's achievements to date. Oliver left school and went on to work for Christopher Bartle, who competed in the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984 (and remains the highest placed British dressage rider in the Olympics).

Oliver moved to Leicestershire from his native Yorkshire four years ago to work with Kenneth Clawson at his base in Leire. Kenneth is one of the UK's leading eventing trainers and is responsible for many of today's top eventers including Oliver's girlfriend and fellow British rider Piggy French.

The house, which he shares with Piggy, their 30 horses, seven staff and his parents, has quickly become home -

and he admits to being happy to spend the rest of his life in Leicestershire. Not least due to the good riding country to be found all around - and the excellent transport links which are so vital when you need to move horses around.

"I'd be happy to stay in Leicestershire forever," he says. "I'd like to buy my own property here, there's good riding country around and good access to the rest of the country."

"The best thing is training a really good horse the best is having to sell them on. "We have to sell a lot of horses to keep going, so a lot of the best horses I've ever ridden have been sold," he admits.

Despite the challenge of keeping the stables going, and though only 25, Oliver has achieved a lot in his very short career; he rode as an Individual for Team GBR at the Europeans in 2006, the same year as he was third in team eventing with Flint Curtis, then in 2007 he was on the gold-winning British team at the Europeans in team eventing.

Highlights last year included winning the Martin Intermediate Championships at Gatcombe with Piggy, winning the Scottish Open title with Flint Curtis at Thirlestane Castle, being in the top 10 on Four at Bramham, to name but a few, plus Flint received the accolade of KBIS British Insurance Event Horse of the Year at Olympia.

More recently Oliver won the CIC*** at Burnham

Market on new ride

Coup De Cour who he hopes to take to Beijing.

Away from the stables, he and Piggy are careful to avoid horsiana in the home. Competitiveness isn't a feature in their relationship and both make an effort not to talk shop, unless one needs professional advice from the other. "It soon becomes a job, the same as everything else," he admits. "We try not to discuss horses. We might talk about any problems and help each other."

Oliver's goal this year is to win as much as possible and is keeping his fingers crossed for the Olympics. He is also on the Toggi Xtreme Team, and is sponsored by Dodson & Horrell, MacWet Gloves, Lincoln, Bucas and TRM Nutrition.

"I didn't do very well in Burghley last year, I tend to be more successful at Badminton. This year I've got a very good set of horses, and it's about having the right horse there. The atmosphere is good and it's a great weekend out for people."

The Burghley Horse Trials take place 4-7 September. For more information visit www.burghley-horse.co.uk