

# THE 'HILLBILLY' HERO

He's the son of a Huddersfield milkman but Oliver Townend is poised to show the world he's a real class act

By Ian Stafford



**T**HE SON OF A Huddersfield milkman from a 'hillbilly' family, Oliver Townend does not fit the traditional image of a three-day eventer. Yet tomorrow he heads for America in search of a victory that will earn him a £225,000 bonus — taking his prizemoney for the season to more than half a million pounds — and the coveted 'Grand Slam' of successive titles at Badminton, Burghley and Kentucky.

For a man many of his rivals thought 'the wrong breed' for the sport, it would be the perfect answer to all their insults on his rise to the top while shaking off what he admits is eventing's 'snobby image'.

'I'm not from a horsey background at all,' says Townend, 27. 'There are 46 Townends spread around the hill just outside Huddersfield and only my parents rode horses a bit. When I decided to leave school and give eventing a go it caused a bit of a rift.'

'My family might have looked a bit "hillbilly" to some, but we were hard-working. We had to be — there wasn't much money about. Most of them were milkmen, gritters, farm machinery dealers and so on, but I knew what I wanted to do.'

'I've had to fight very hard to get to where I am now. It toughens you up or you quit. It has not been a smooth passage. A lot of difficulties have been placed in my way.'

'People, especially other riders, have been worried about me being a threat to their positions, and it's very clear to them that I'm not from the same place as the others.'

'Actually, I'm very proud of this and I've found all the incidents and things said to me in the warm-up areas inspirational. It's made me determined to be the best.'

'I'm a Yorkshire lad and I often got the impression people didn't take to me because I was the "wrong breed" for eventing. It's that snobby image we must shake off to move forward. We need to show it's not just for those with rich, privileged backgrounds.'

**O**NLY Britain's Pippa Funnell has ever achieved what Townend — already one of just four riders to win Britain's two leading three-day events in the same year — will be attempting this week at the Rolex Kentucky in Lexington. Funnell did it in 2003 with two horses, whereas Townend, who was just a reserve for Britain at the 2008 Olympics, will be trying on an unprecedented third different horse.

'I go to America reasonably confident I can pull it off,' he adds, sitting in his farmhouse on the Shropshire-Welsh border. 'I'm in a very happy place right now with myself and my horses, and I'm going to give it my best shot.'

'There are two reasons why I won Badminton and Burghley. First, the horses. Flint Curtis just seemed to click in the run-up to Badminton and

once I took the lead after the cross-country stage I knew I would win.

'It was an achievement just to get Carousel Quest to the start of Burghley because he'd had a lot of time off through injury, but I also knew if he was fit he'd stand a chance because he'd finished fourth at Burghley with a previous rider. This time we led from the start.'

'But I was also getting to grips with myself. I've finally grown up, as a rider and as a person. I've made a few mistakes along the way and probably not helped myself much.'

'I haven't been the best at expressing myself. I've been a bit too honest for my own good and haven't always

meant how things have come across. I've learned from this.

'Winning Badminton may have been a huge leap forward for me, but it was one that needed to happen in my own mind. The more you fail to win, the more you question yourself.'

'The funny thing was, I was so calm and relaxed just before the final showjumping round, when I knew I was on the verge of winning, it worried me.'

'Winning it gave me the self-belief that I could win at this level. People may have thought I've always had self-belief, but there's a difference between determination born out of

I'm very proud of where I came from. There wasn't much money about in my family so I had to fight to get where I am today

your experiences and self-belief. The truth is I was never really satisfied.'

Burghley completed the process for Townend. 'Winning there from the front, and on a different horse, removed all the remaining demons inside me,' he says.

'It proved that Badminton wasn't a one-off, that I had the mentality to win more than one major classic, and that I could deal with my newfound status in the sport when suddenly I was expected to perform.'

'And, by winning on a different horse, it proved it wasn't all down to the horse.'

'I'm far more relaxed and confi-

**HIGH FLYER:** Oliver Townend, who now mixes with the likes of Zara Phillips (above), shows the form aboard Flint Curtis (left) that could bring him a £225,000 bonus this week in America with his horses Master Rose and Ashdale Cruise Master (top)

dent now. I don't feel as if I need to keep proving things to myself or to others, and neither do I have to keep opening my mouth all the time. It's helped me grow up and now I want to be the best in the world.'

Townend, who will defend his Badminton title at the end of this month, will ride two horses in Kentucky, the venue for the World Championships in August, Ashdale Cruise Master and ODT Master Rose. It is the former, with whom he won the Class Three event at Burnham Market just a fortnight ago, that he has high hopes for.

'Ashdale Cruise Master is the horse I believe is my best option for the worlds this year, the Europeans next year and then the 2012 London Olympics,' he says.

'I've no idea what will happen this week in Kentucky, but I do know I finished eighth last year on my first visit and that both Ashdale Cruise Master and I are in good form.'

'It's not often you get the chance of winning the treble, and the thought of becoming the first to achieve this on three different horses is a huge motivation.'

'If I achieve this I'll cry even more than I did after winning Badminton and Burghley.'

Townend laughs at himself. 'I know, I know, I'm supposed to be a tough Northerner,' he adds. 'But it just shows how much it means to me, and the long road I've needed to take to get here.'

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