

Chain of events

Kate Healey talks to Oliver Townend about the sheer hard work involved in achieving the pinnacle of equestrian success



Oliver Townend is a man who has little time for superstition or chance – hard work and unremitting preparation are more his style.

The 26-year-old has just claimed one of the greatest titles in the equestrian world – the Mitsubishi Motors Badminton Horse Trials, a three-day event for which many riders wait until their 30s and 40s before even achieving the qualifying standard.

He won the Badminton title riding from his new base, at Dudleston Heath near Ellesmere, where his attention to detail is evident everywhere.

"I had been based in Leicestershire, but places were so expensive there," said Oliver, who was born and grew up near Huddersfield.

"We bought this yard from Charles Britton and have created a fantastic facility, which includes two arenas, a lunging pen and a horse walker."

The old dairy has been transformed to increase the stabling from 10 boxes to 45 and they sit alongside staff accommodation and a house for the Townends.

Oliver's eventing career is very much a family affair, in which dad Alan and mum Eve play a pivotal role, along with current stable jockey Helen Wilson.

"My parents are a huge support – they still have their house in Yorkshire but have come down here to help me," Oli continued.

Well

"Dad is up at 5am to feed and has got this just right, as all the horses look well and feel good in their brain. Helen rides a lot of the novice horses, as well as the older ones when they are not competing – we also have a real good bunch of girls working for us."

Alan, who has ridden round Burghley three-day event himself in the past, was the reason Oliver first started riding at the tender age of seven.

"He got dragged around with me competing and finally thought 'I've got to suffer this so I might as well do it myself'," Alan laughed. "It snowballed from there and he eventually took over. I won a couple of advanced events but it was always more of a hobby for me."

Five years after he first climbed into the saddle, at the age of 12, Oliver won the Junior Newcomers showjumping final at the Horse of the Year Show on his pony Cool Mule.

"At 14 he showjumped for England at Home Pony International level and did Junior trials on my last horse, Gold Ringer," Alan added.

Oliver's desire to learn and improve took him to the Harrogate yard of Olympic dressage rider and Badminton winner Chris Bartle for six months, and he went on to spend three years with Great Britain showjumping coach Ken Clawson, in Leicestershire.

"Both of them taught me a lot, and New Zealand Olympic medalist Andrew Nicholson

Oliver Townend takes a moment out from another hectic day



has also been very supportive." Oliver said. "My dad has been my major influence but I don't really have any idols as such, nor any superstitions about lucky socks or counting magpies. It always surprises me that some riders do – I just train as properly and methodically as possible and work as hard as I can."

That single-mindedness led to him being offered the ride on Edward and Robert Nicholson's great grey horse Flint Curtis, who had been through several other riders before finally coming to Oliver.

"I liked the horse when I saw him at Bramham three-day event in 2005 with another rider – he had a few showjumps down but I liked his general outlook. I just kept ringing the guy who owned him and

that paid off when I got the ride. He's good in all three phases – he can get a bit low in showjumping but so long as I do a good job, he does well."

Oliver admitted that his Badminton win, relatively early in a sport where riders go on competing internationally into their 50s and even 60s, had "taken a big pressure off".

The prize money was nice too, as it's very difficult to finance a yard like mine in this sport. My main income, unlike many other riders, is selling horses and prize money and it's a relief to win a big sum. I've not sold a lot of horses recently as it's the quiet time of the season – it heats up later on when the horses have really shown what they can do and people start thinking of next year."

Oliver had little time to relax and rest on his

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laurels after his Badminton victory, however. He was straight onto producing the next generation, with a trip to the Aston-le-Walls one day event in Northants and the Chatsworth International in Derbyshire, before travelling over to France for the Saumur CCI*** three-day event.

"It's fair to say I get as much pleasure from riding a nice young horse as I do winning a big title," he said. "Riding a new horse that you know is going to be good, at his first Intermediate one-day event, gives me just as much a thrill as winning."

That craving to find the star of the future has led to Oliver gaining a reputation as one of the hardest-working riders on the event circuit, which runs from March to the end of October, alongside veteran Andrew Nicholson.

This season he has competed no fewer than 83 times to date, on more than 25 different



Oliver Townend with his Badminton trophy.



Oli showed an interest at a very young age (top) and was soon winning trophies as a junior.



Flint Curtis with Katherine Mellor, head groom for Oliver.



horses, and has made the top ten in nearly half of these outings.

The quest to make the 2012 Olympics fuels Oliver as much as any event rider, although he admits to thinking "people go overboard about this sometimes".

He added: "Flint Curtis will only be 16 in 2012 and a lot of 16-year-old and even 17-year-old horses have done really well in major competitions. I believe several of the horses in my current string also have the ability to make it and there's no reason why Britain shouldn't do well."

In the meantime the Townends will just keep their noses to the grindstone, putting in 17 hours a day, working seven days a week and living on a "financial knife-edge". Such are the demands on 21st-century sporting stars – and no one is more likely to withstand the pressure than Oliver.

Find out all about Oliver, his horses, his team and his sponsors. For just £15 a year you can join Oliver's members club. Members receive a limited edition baseball cap and signed photo as well as a password to gain access to the behind-the-scenes area of his website.

Members receive a monthly email newsletter from Oliver and will also be invited to a members' party at the end of the eventing season, held at Oliver's yard and hosted, of course, by Oliver. Meet the team and the horses and find out what a top-level competition yard is really like. To join, visit the website www.olivertownend.com