

## FEATURES

# Sitting high in the saddle

Shropshire eventer Oliver Townend proves you don't have to be super rich to succeed



Oliver on Carousell Quest



BY ALEX JAMES  
ajames@shropshirestar.co.uk



Oliver celebrates after winning The Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials in 2009



After winning the Mitsubishi Motors Badminton Horse Trials in 2009 on Flint Curtis



Ashdale Cruise Master falls on Oliver

Approaching the 20th fence, Oliver was looking good. He'd overcome a tortuous 51-hour journey to America by train, car and plane, to avoid the Icelandic volcanic ash. The Rolex Grand Slam was within touching distance for the 27-year-old from Ellesmere, and with it a place in history – not to mention the £230,000 winner's cheque.

But there was one challenge Townsend and his horse, Ashdale Cruise Master, couldn't overcome in their quest to become the first to win Badminton, Burghley and Kentucky back-to-back.

The 20th may have only been four feet high but it had already been the downfall of two other riders that day and, after a moment's hesitation from the horse, the fence known as the Hollow had claimed its third victim. "It was all very quick," said Townsend of the fall.

"You wouldn't want too many like it, but I was lucky enough to walk away which was the biggest positive. I was the third one to fall at that fence – you possibly won't see a fence like that for a while but at the same time it was just one of those things and I made a mistake.

"I was banned from competing for 21

days because I was knocked out and I broke the tip of my shoulder, my collarbone, my sternum and four ribs. You wouldn't want it all the time."

Yet the top Shropshire eventer was back in the saddle just three weeks later – hungrier and more determined than ever before. It is exactly that sort of attitude which saw the former world number one put together that remarkable string of results in 2009.

Townend says the fall has brought him back down to earth with a bump, literally.

He said: "It just shows you that you can never get big headed in our job. I was world number one last year right to the end of the season and then I've done very little other than sit on my backside this year. It keeps you level and it keeps you working hard.

"I've had quite a few bumps and

bruises in the past but I've always been managed to get back a lot quicker. Whatever I've broken I've always managed to get back within a week – this is definitely the longest time out but at the same time it's just made me hungrier to get going again.

"I've been in the job long enough to make sure you enjoy the good moments because they're outweighed by some of the not so good moments."

Townend added that the hunger and drive, something which has been with him since he first got on a horse at seven-years-old, had returned during his brief lay off.

And there is one thing which makes him want to get back in the arena and compete again and again – regardless of injury or risk: "I miss winning," he said. "I always hope to have a win every week or so when were in form and obviously that hasn't happened for a while because of that set back but I'm hungrier than ever."

There is more to Townend, however, exceptional sportsmanship. The quality that singles him out from other top-ranked sportsmen is his business acumen.

"It's a very difficult thing to get the balance right," he adds.

"I don't think there are many people in the world making a living out of eventing. My main source of income normally is buying and selling horses, last year it was luckily by prize money."

"There were some horses that needed to be moved out of the stable to allow the stable and the business to increase in quality and I think we've done

that. I've got fewer horses now than I had and I think that's a positive. I'm really starting to concentrate on keeping producing those top class results at the biggest events in the world. It's really made me tighten up again and I've got a great team of horses, a fantastic team of people and a good bunch of owners. I've got 34 horses now and that's small in comparison."

## Lucky place

Sitting in his scenic 35-acre Dudleston Heath base with nothing but the sound of horses' hooves for company it is clear that hard work has paid off. Townend, who moved to his current home 18 months ago, added: "So far it's been an unbelievably lucky place.

"The first competition we won out of the place was the New Express Eventing down in Cardiff at the Millennium Stadium which was for £100,000 then we went on to win Badminton and then Burghley.

"It was always too good to be true. You're always going to get a knock with horses, you can't continue at that rate – it's unheard of. It's never happened in the world before and I'd be surprised if it ever happened again."

And with the World Championships coming up later this year, back at the same Kentucky venue where Townend suffered his fall, and the London Olympics on the horizon Townend cannot afford to rest easy. He said: "Hopefully it's the world champions first. I'm qualified on a couple of horses but I've still got to get selected so hopefully I'll go to the worlds.

"At the forefront of everybody's minds is the Olympics in 2012 which we've got a strong team of young horses and I'm very hopeful."

