

FEATURES

Star rider with bit between his teeth

A Shropshire eventer who has won both Badminton and Burghley horse trials talks candidly about his single-minded determination to succeed

Life is good for Oliver Townend.

British equestrian's current star attraction relaxes in the lounge of his stunning Shropshire farmhouse, sipping coffee, contentedly taking stock.

The word "unbelievable" crops up in conversation more than once.

And why wouldn't it when, aged just 26, you have achieved the stellar eventing feat of a Badminton/Burghley double in the same year on different horses?

Then there is the prize money - £210,000 from three big wins during the past 10 months - with an additional £300,000 and more waiting to be claimed between now and Easter.

This weekend he is among the principal challengers for European gold medal glory in France as Great Britain defend their team title and Townend additionally targets a first individual crown.

At his current rate of progress, London 2012 threatens to hold serious - very serious - Olympic medal prospects.

Yet it is only five years ago that Townend took the plunge,

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making the brave decision to go it alone in a rough and tumble world where the only certainty was uncertainty.

But a bucket-load of proverbial grit from his native Yorkshire, plus a personal drive and ambition so fierce it bordered on the terrifying, helped make anything possible.

It has though, proved a sometimes painful rise to the top, and Townend knows he is not everyone's cup of tea.

Yet when it comes to straight-talking, Townend's refreshing honesty matches his thrilling riding ability.

"I think there is a certain perception of me within eventing, which upsets me," says Townend, who has been based at stables in Duddlestone Heath, near Ellesmere, since moving his headquarters to north Shropshire last winter.

"I've never really spoken about it before now, or never really had the opportunity to

speak about it, but I made myself into a person that I really, really didn't like or want to be.

"I had to be tough. I knew exactly where I wanted to get to, and if anyone was going to get in the way, they were going to get squashed, trodden on or whatever it would have taken.

"I wouldn't have cared because I was so, so desperate for whatever reason to prove everybody wrong that I could make a living out of eventing.

"People used to tell me I should get a proper job, and not just a hobby, all that kind of rubbish. That's where the drive started from.

"It's always been that little bit of people saying to me 'no you can't, no you can't, no you can't' that made me go a little bit bull-headed.

"Because of that, I did definitely become bitter trying to make it, and then I did become unbelievably driven.

"Yes, I did sell all my best horses for large sums of money. When you say to someone like a lot of the other top riders 'would you sell that horse?' They say 'I couldn't possibly because he means the world to me.'

"But if they were on their

backsides and they had to pay, rent next week, then sure as heck they would sell them.

"It's just because they are in a very comfortable or fortunate position. I don't think people understood my mentality of having to sell the good horse.

"I still cared about it as much as they would have, but they were fortunate enough that they never had to do it.

"When I set up on my own five years ago, I had £1,400, no horses, no car and no (horse) wagon, so I guess it's been quite quick what has happened.

"But I never gave myself time to doubt myself, and it's a different world now. Sometimes I look around this place, and I can't believe it's mine.

"I've possibly made a lot of enemies along the way, or not made myself popular because of how I've been, but to get where I've got to I had to become a person I didn't really want to be.

Established

"I had to go a little bit through a pain barrier to get the rides like (Badminton winner) Flint Curtis and stuff to start with.

"Perhaps I have upset people, which I am obviously not proud of, but now I am established and hopefully producing my own horses, I am trying to get back to where I started from, which is someone that just wanted to ride horses and do it as a job."

So what of the future?

Once the Europeans are done and dusted, he makes a quick-fire return to France next month for Les Etoiles de Pau, the last event in this year's HSBC Classics series.

It carries a £92,000 overall winner's purse, with Townend currently leading by 12 points from his nearest rival - and last year's winner - Great Britain team-mate William Fox-Pitt.

Then comes the big one - the Rolex Grand Slam, worth around £215,000 for a rider winning consecutive Badminton, Burghley and Lexington, Kentucky four-star events.

It is a clean sweep so demanding that only one rider - Pippa Funnell - has previously achieved it.

"I am still taking it in, really.



Oliver Townend with Flint Curtis and his Badminton trophy

It's been unbelievable," Townend added. "I thought I would win Badminton from the end of November last year. I couldn't see a way of not winning, as long as I didn't do anything completely stupid. The horse was unbelievably on form.

"Everything leading up to it just went right - it was just a very confident and comfortable feeling about it.

"As for Burghley (on Carousel Quest), I knew we had an each-way chance because the horse had been there before and finished fourth with his previous rider. He's a class horse.

"To win Badminton and Burghley on separate horses is more special to me than anything. It hopefully shows what a good team and good management we've got.

"I think I've grown up, and my horses have grown up at the same time. A lot has fallen into line all at once that hopefully pays for a lot of hard work over the last 10 years or so.

"I hope I am somebody people can relate to more than anything, in terms of younger riders coming through in the sport.



Riding high... eventing star Oliver Townend, whose stables are based at Duddlestone Heath near Ellesmere

ers coming through in the sport.

"I am not from a particularly amazing eventing background, or I am not particularly from money. I just hope it gives people hope that if eventing is really what they want to do, they can actually get off their backsides and do it."



Oliver Townend in cross country action in Greece, shortly before the Athens Olympics