

# From 'Hillbilly' to the peaks of perfection

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*Unheralded Townend has the chance to make history with the Rolex Grand Slam*

**By Ian Chadband  
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OLIVER TOWNEND breaks into a grin when asked what people really think of him in the rarefied world of three-day eventing. "I think they either love me or hate me," he says. "I'm like Marmite, me". And like Marmite, he may just become a great British institution too.

Here is one of domestic sport's best-kept secrets. Finest in the world in a ferociously competitive arena, the man who has won more money in eventing over the past 18 months than any rider in history remains, despite his rare double triumph at Badminton and Burghley in the same year, almost criminally unheralded beyond his equestrian domain.

If this were the 1970s, when eventing, showjumping and Dorian Williams ruled the Beeb airwaves, Townend would be a national figure. Brilliant, cocky, controversial, a kind of pretty-boy Harvey Smith cutting a ruthless winning swathe through a world fondly perceived to be populated only by HRHs, Double-Barrels and Lucindas.

Ah, but he has time on his side. The legend of the Yorkshire milkman's boy who escaped from Scapegoat Hill to create his own equestrian empire and become a sporting legend may only just be starting now. At 27, it might just be time for him to go global.

For this week, Townend seeks to make record-breaking history in Lexington, Kentucky when, following his Badminton and Burghley wins, he sets out to win the final leg of eventing's Rolex Grand Slam, hunting down the sport's biggest-ever jackpot – a \$350,000 bonus on top of a \$65,000 first prize, meaning a total of \$415,000 (about £268,000). Only Pippa Funnell, seven years ago, has ever achieved this hat-trick which Townend describes as "a surreal dream".

If he is not the face of British eventing quite yet – his great pal Zara Phillips will take some shifting – he clearly thinks he is going to be.

"My story's as good for the sport as it is for me," he says. "People think of eventing



**Gray area: Oliver Townend with another of his competition horses, Neo du Breuil**

as being a bit elitist and snobby and I'm definitely not from that background. Hopefully I'll end up doing the sport a bit of good by showing a normal lad from a working-class background can get to the highest level."

Townend has had his detractors within the sport who think he has been too chippy, too money-oriented and not fussy about treading over or upsetting people as long as he gets his way. A clash of cultures?

"No, I'm misconceived as a tough, hard Yorkshire lad who's only interested in winning and cash when actually, I just love riding horses, love the sport.

"I've said things, wound up people in the

past, but I'm trying to learn from my mistakes and move on."

As you can gather, he is not shy. But for those of us who love Marmite, he's actually winningly self-approving, quite a nice bloke. When I suggest that New Zealander Mark Todd, his friend, is the best eventing horseman in history, he retorts: "Hope not. Hope it's me. At the moment, I do believe I'm the best around and I'd like to be for a long, long time. Like a champion, a Tony McCoy for eventing."

If he wins in the Lexington Classic which begins on Thursday, he deserves to be the sport's poster boy, especially with the prospect of completing the grand slam on

three different poster horses, all lovely grays. At his stables at Dudleston Heath in Shropshire, he introduces the three neighbours. First, trusty Badminton winner Flint Curtis, the big-hearted tryer. Then, Burghley champ Carousel Quest, "so quirky he's even been disqualified in the dressage a few times – and that takes some doing!"

Finally, his new horse and big Lexington hope, Ashdale Cruise Master, who's a bit of a mix of the other two. "I think he has the talent, brain and heart which, hopefully, will make him incredibly special," enthuses Townend.

He will also be riding ODT Master Rose in Lexington but it is 'Splash', as his new

acquisition is affectionately known, which takes Townend's fancy as a potential golden mount for 2012. "The Olympics? The competition which could define my career," he accepts. It was the misery at missing the cut for Beijing which spurred him on to such an extent that he has been an unstoppable force ever since.

"But even though being Olympic champion would be a dream, it is as big an achievement in my eyes that I've managed to set up all this from the background I came from. It's been some journey." A journey which, as he looks around a 35-acre yard featuring his six-bedroom house, offices and stables for 45 horses, has evidently culminated with him becoming as accomplished a businessman as he is a rider.

It seems a lifetime away from the wonderfully named Scapegoat Hill, "a fairly cold, miserable village" on the hilly outskirts of Huddersfield where he grew up. He was an only child but you couldn't move for Townends here.

"There were loads of us. We did everything: making trailers, dealing in farm machinery and stuff. Dad did a milk round. We were a bit Hillbillyish, a bit like the Dingles!" he grins.

Dad Alan loved his horses and bought and sold a few to pay for an eventing hobby which saw him compete once at Burghley and also for an £800 pony, Cool Mule, who carried 11-year-old Oliver to a showjumping win at the Horse of the Year Show.

After spells at various yards, on his 21st birthday Townend started his own in Leicestershire. He had £1,400, no horses, and was renting a place he could barely afford. The big break came when meeting a multi-millionaire owner Andrew Cavthray. He gave Townend money to buy a horse, Townend trained it, they sold it on and shared the profits. Their business blueprint was set.

Townend seems completely driven. Almost obsessively. He rides up to five horses in one-day competitions, sometimes five times a week, leaving his stables at 2am and returning about 10pm.

"It's why I'm 27 and look 37," he grins. It's why he is occasionally visited by depression and why his private life has suffered. It is also why he won £350,000 last year.

A voice keeps pushing him on. He remembers his grandad telling him to "forget horses, get yourself a proper job". But a Rolex Grand Slam? And Scapegoat Hill's first Olympic champ? Sometimes, you can forget the real world.