

Fearless Townend cashes in but riders find it tough going

Equestrianism

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Oliver Townend, of Great Britain, riding Flint Curtis, his British team horse, won the record £100,000 first prize in the inaugural Express Eventing International Cup yesterday at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff after a fearless performance over the drama-filled cross-country course in which 11 of the 19 contestants were eliminated.

The day was marred by the death of Call Again Cavalier, Mary King's superb Olympic horse, who was put down with a suspected broken femur after falling at fence 12b, an influential double of corners. The 16-year-old gelding was one of the most popular in the sport and had excelled as part of the bronze medal-winning team in Hong Kong this year.

Townend, 26, who was in fifth place after the dressage-to-music test, stormed round the 16-fence course —

constructed overnight after the Wales v Australia rugby union international — to finish more than half a minute faster than Lucy Wiegiersma on Shaabrak, her Badminton runner-up. But Wiegiersma had no complaints —

the £50,000 she took home for second place was her richest prize to date. William Fox-Pitt, riding his "old pro" Ballincoola, runner-up at Burghley in September, took the early lead but had to settle for third and £20,000.



A crowd of 14,000 attended yesterday's event at the Millennium Stadium

"He's a racing machine, he's just class," the Yorkshire-born Townend said of the grey Flint Curtis, a member of the gold medal-winning team at the 2007 European Championships. Visibly emotional, he said: "I know I'm meant to be a tough Yorkshire bloke, but I needed this money — it'll take care of at least three months' mortgage repayments."

But with only three others completing the event — Caroline Powell, of New Zealand, on Lenamore, who produced one of the most stylish rounds of the day, Vittoria Panizzon, of Italy, on Rock Model, and Clayton Fredericks, of Australia, on Ben Along Time, there is no doubt that the much-heralded competition — the idea of Stuart Buntine of Tricorn Events — needs some serious fine-tuning if it is to succeed.

"Horses don't know what this type of competition is," Todd said. "We

don't really train them for this sort of thing." Fox-Pitt said: "The day has not been at all relaxing; you had to concentrate extremely hard, the fences all came up so fast — but I'm sure we'll all get better at it."

Mike Tucker, the technical delegate, said: "It wasn't an enjoyable day for the organisers as not enough riders got through, but I've no doubt the concept will go forward."

Although only 14,000 tickets were sold, there was no lack of atmosphere. The dressage-to-music phase opened the proceedings with stirring performances from Bettina Hoy, of Germany, on Ringwood Cockatoo, the leaders in this phase, and Alex Hua Tian, of China, on Chico, who was third after the dressage. The latter, an Eton schoolboy who has spent the past month practising for the event, was one of several riders eliminated in the jumping for taking the wrong course.