

Geoff and Oli a big hit as comical double act

From pirouettes and piafos to picking up a pint of Guinness in mid-air, **Rebecca Short** watched the antics of the Champions Tour at the Grange EC

TWO of the UK's top riders shared their expertise in the acclaimed Champions Tour, held at one of the Westcountry's most popular venues on Friday night.

Former Olympic showjumper Geoff Billington and European eventing gold medalist Oliver Townend teamed up to wow fans with an evening of entertainment, tricks and riding tips, interlaced with plenty of banter at the Grange Equestrian Centre, near Okehampton.

Their partnership was a tried-and-tested formula, both having worked together during this series of demonstrations, which began in Ireland in November before moving on to venues in Scotland and the north of England, then heading to the Westcountry.

"The tour went really well. It's great to do something different from what I normally do, and to work with Geoff has definitely been an experience," said Oliver.

The pair offered hints and tips for schooling horses, both on the flat and over fences, while providing a comical element by imitating each other.

During the demonstration, showjumper Geoff paid an emotional tribute to his top class horse, It's Otto, who passed away at 23 years of age.

Claire Tregaskis, of St Anns Chapel, near Kingsbridge, watched the duo in action.

She said: "I really enjoyed the evening. Geoff and Oli were both very entertaining and the four hours seemed to fly by."

"I thought the flatwork demonstrated by Oli was educational and Geoff made those huge fences look a piece of cake."

Claire's sister Tania added: "I thought it was fantastic that they had youngsters for the demonstrations as they did play up at times and we got to see how they dealt with them."

Show rider Pippa Wonnacott said: "I thought it was a comical and educational evening for riders of all levels to enjoy."

The last 12 months have heralded a golden year for Oliver.

As well as being a European team gold medalist, he is the current Badminton and Burghley Horse Trials champion,



Oliver Townend on Geoff Billington's £1,000 champion pick-up at the jumping



Oli and Geoff entertain an audience with jokes and imitations

having won this year riding Flint Curtis and Carousel Quest respectively.

He was also the winner of the Express Eventing International Cup, riding the popular grey gelding, Flint Curtis.

This challenging new competition took place at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium in November 2008, resulting in a record first prize of £100,000 being brought home to Yorkshire by this talented young rider.

Geoff Billington has been competing at top level for more than 35 years and has represented Great Britain at two Olympic Games, recently representing team GB at the European Championships at Windsor.

He has an impressive tally of international wins to his name, including the Hickstead Derby and more recently the Hamburg Derby.