



Fit-again Huddersfield star Townend vows to regain his world No 1 status

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WHILE keen to highlight the positives, Huddersfield's Oliver Townend knows he has been blessed with better eventing years than 2013.

A year featuring frustrating equine injuries ended with the rider himself suffering a broken shoulder. It means the former world No 1 now lies 45th in the HSBC global rankings. Yet a confident Townend insists a return to the world-wide top spot is not a case of if but when.

Shropshire-based Townend missed the last few weeks of the 2013 campaign after breaking his shoulder following a September fall from ODT Ghareeb at Ballindenisk. The year also featured minor injuries to three of his brightest young horses in Outside Chance, Douglas and Imperial Master yet Townend still finished third in the British Eventing riders list.

And the Yorkshireman believes his injury might have been a blessing in disguise with the 31-year-old's batteries now recharged ahead of a 2014 campaign which will begin at Aston-Le-Walls in March.

Eventually, all roads will lead to the year's first CCI four-star event at Badminton in May where Townend – on Armada – will aim to repeat his 2009 victory on Flint Curtis.

**FIGHTING BACK:** Great Britain's Oliver Townend will again be aboard Armada for the CCI four-star events.

PICTURE: STEVE PARSONS/PA

It was a year in which the Huddersfield ace was also victorious at Burghley and a year in which the former Salendine Nook High School pupil was world No 1.

New Zealand's Andrew Nicholson now holds that ranking but Townend – 21 years Nicholson's junior – exudes every confidence in getting back to where he was and this time savouring top spot for a fair degree longer.

"Obviously I want to be back at world No 1," said Townend.

"Once I get there, I want to stay there for a good bit longer.

"I'm going to be properly

established in the next few years horse-power wise and if I put the work into it, it's not a case in my mind of whether I ever will be world No 1 again – it's just when I can make it happen.

"It's a case of when we'll have the horse-power to get me there. Last year was a year where I felt as though the horses ran well and everything progressed well.

"There were a few unfortunate bits of injuries which was nothing serious but stopped progress a little bit but everything that I wanted to progress in terms of strengthening up did do.

"I broke my shoulder at the end of the year which was frustrating but the horses had run enough so it gave me quite a nice breather.

"Obviously, I didn't finish where I wanted to in the rankings but even after missing the last good few weeks of the season I was still in the top three in the country so it's not that bad.

"I've now got the best horses I've ever had and I feel like I'm in a position that the likes of Andrew Nicholson and Fox-Pitt were two or three years ago.

"I've got the horse power, I've got the support and I just

need to put the time and work in now and get the mileage that these horses need. Then, when they do get to the top, top level, they will be ready to be competitive."

Ellesmere-based Townend admits Armada will again be his CCI four-star flag-bearer with the 15-year-old set to compete at Burgham in Northumbria on March 29.

Townend himself will get underway with five rides at Aston-Le-Walls on March 1 and hopes to be at the peak of his powers for Badminton in May in a year which will also feature a bid for a repeat of 2009 glory at Burghley. Yet

the Yorkshireman admits that an event in 2016 remains at the forefront of his mind – the Rio Olympics – for which he believes he has the perfect horse for.

Townend is keeping that close to his chest but there is no denying the lure of Olympic representation with the eventing ace hoping becoming first British and then world No 1 will make him an automatic choice to represent Team GB.

"Rio is definitely on my mind and I've already picked my horse for it but I'll keep that to myself," he said.

"Everyone wants to get to the Olympics and it's not just as simple as getting to the Olympics. It's about making things balance with the rest of your life and actually paying the bills.

"There's no point going to the Olympics and living in a caravan but now we are established, I am enjoying where I live and we have got the support of loyal, long-term owners and sponsors. It's just a case of keeping the horses and waiting for them to get there. I also want to be British No 1 but, as much as what I can do, it all depends on what Mr Fox-Pitt does as well."

It also depends on a lack of injuries – a factor Townend could do little about in 2013.

The number 13 certainly proved unlucky from that perspective. Yet there are positives to be drawn even from his Ballindenisk fall.

"The shoulder is fine. I basically ruptured the ligaments that holds your arm to your body but it's fine and 98 per cent there. I can't wait to get going. I finished early last year so I had a bit of an earlier break and started earlier this year. Hopefully we are going to be ready to rock and roll."