

# Townend happy to be tackling hectic schedule after rising to No 1 ranking

Lee Sobot

FROM Blenheim Palace to Ireland to the south of France; now is an ultra-busy time for Yorkshire equestrian star Oliver Townend.

However, the 29-year-old would not have it any other way, the Huddersfield rider being convinced that an exciting future is just around the corner.

Despite surprisingly missing out on an London 2012 Olympic call, Townend is Britain's No 1 equestrian eventer following last weekend's fourth-placed finish at the Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials.

That performance kept Townend in front of William Fox-Pitt, who finished third on Parklane Hawk at Burghley, and the British riders will do battle again this weekend as part of a star-studded cast at the Fidelity Blenheim Palace International Horse Trials.

It has meant two big events in two weekends for Townend who barely had time to collect his post-Burghley thoughts on arriving back at his Shropshire yard base at the beginning of the week before setting off to Blenheim first thing on Wednesday morning.

It will be the same again next week with Ireland calling for the launch of the Johnson & Perrott Land Rover International Horse Trials at Ballindenisk in County Cork.

After competing at the North Yorkshire Aske International on September 22-23, a trip to France then beckons, principally for the prestigious



TOP RANKING: Oliver Townend rides Armada in the cross-country stage during the Burghley Horse Trials.

PICTURE: STEVE PARSONS/PA

Les Etoiles de Pau four-star on October 24.

A busy old time but, especially after losing many events to the weather this year, Townend would not want it any other way.

"We are going to be more or less away for six or seven weeks now but it's all part of it," said Townend.

"We've got a big string of horses and we are very lucky to have a good team of owners with us that keep bringing on these horses

"It's been a frustrating year obviously because around 74 days of eventing have been cancelled due to the weather but everyone has been in the same position.

"It's been a tricky year from that perspective but we have got a great team of horses and a great team of owners and with the performances we have had we are hopefully looking forward to the next couple of years."

Townend is looking forward to this weekend's showpiece

at Blenheim Palace where the likes of Zara Phillips and Northallerton star and Olympic silver medallist Nicola Wilson are also competing.

For Townend, the event is being used as something of an educational learning curve for three younger horses that the Yorkshireman has long-term high hopes for – Douglas, ODT Ghareeb and Outside Chance.

All three are regarded as big players in an exciting future

"They are young horses – eight and nine-year-olds – and they are relatively inexperienced at top level or three-stars," said Townend. "But they are good horses for the future I think.

"I'm not saying they are going to go and rule the world this weekend but they have definitely got potential for the future."

A rosy future is also envisaged for the two horses that Townend rode last weekend at Burghley.

Armada was the obvious star act, having sealed a fourth-placed finish behind the combination of Awebury and Andrew Nicholson – Armada's former rider.

Sonas Rovatio, meanwhile, was retired at the cross-country stage at Burghley but Townend feels both still have an enormous amount to offer with the latter expected to fare much better at Pau next month.

"Sonas Rovatio was slightly disappointing but the ground didn't suit him and he didn't feel like he was enjoying it that much," said Townend. "But there we are. He's a very good horse and we'll just find somewhere with a bit firmer ground. He'll probably aim for Pau at the end of the year.

"He's been very consistent throughout his career and we can't be anything but pleased with him. He's improving all the time and the competition just didn't suit him this time.

"Armada is obviously a tricky horse otherwise Andrew wouldn't have given up the ride – he wouldn't give up the ride on many horses.

"But at the same time he is obviously phenomenally talented and we are lucky to have him here.

"We have hopefully found the key to getting good results out of him. An awful lot of work has gone into him, he's improved a lot and that was his best four-star performance as yet.

"That's nine four-stars altogether now and for a horse to complete that many four-stars is a big achievement."