

Hughes, for the improvement. The surprise of Friday morning was Ringwood Sky Boy, who took a huge leap from his Badminton mark of 48.1 to bounce into fifth place on 38.7.

"He's not God's gift to dressage, but the one thing he does improve all the time. Every day he comes out and does his best; I love horses like that," said a delighted Tim.

The final pair of the 74 starters were Oliver Townend and Paul and Diana Ridgeon's Armada. At the seven Burghleys this now-16-year-old has contested with first

Andrew Nicholson and then Oliver, his scores have covered the spectrum; 67.5 in 2009, and now his best four-star mark to date of 38.7 for equal fifth.

Oliver rode beautifully, and the judges rewarded him with the only two 10s of the competition – both from Nick Burton, for his first and last halts. It was a shame that Armada struck off on the wrong leg after the halt to rein-back, but not even clattering into the boards during a shoulder-in rocked this mercurial horse's focus.

It was interesting that the French had passed over a couple of their most experienced combinations for Blair – at which they must qualify for the Olympics – and Cedric Lyard led them with a very soft, obedient test for 39.6 and ninth place on Cadeau Du Roi.

Riders slightly disappointed after this phase included Paul Tapner, who thought Kilronan should have been better marked than his 41.7 for equal 12th with Mark Todd and Leonidas II, who didn't look quite as forward as he can be.

But consensus of opinion was that the dressage placings may become irrelevant 24 hours later, and plenty of riders – especially the less-experienced – found sleep hard to come by on Friday night ahead of the prospect of Mark Phillips' cross-country track.



Joy: Oliver Townend scores 38.7 with Armada, as Matt Ryan interviews him



CROSS-COUNTRY 'A brave course'

Tina Cook excels across country to finish best of the home side with eighth on Star Witness

Mark Phillips' cross-country track generates all the right hype and provides a brilliant result, with enough influence, good riding and horses finishing well

CROSS-COUNTRY day underlined what an outstanding course-designer Mark Phillips is. He took the track in a different direction; from the third fence it turned left to the Lion Bridge and, after tackling two water complexes in succession, horses were asked to gallop up Winners' Avenue, where the ground proved quite soft, to the Cottesmore Leap. Stamina was therefore tested early on, and there was an increased intensity. And the so-called "let-up" fences were simply enormous.

"It's a brave course," said William Fox-Pitt, while Paul Tapner described it as "the toughest four-star track of recent times".

It created all the right hype, and left the world keenly anticipating Saturday. But what ensued was an excellent day for the sport; one

on which the vast majority of competitors showed horsemanship and courage, and horses came home well.

Mark said on Sunday: "I certainly didn't set out to make it the biggest Burghley. I knew it was big, but it always is – and yes,

I was a little bit surprised when the riders got here and started describing it as the biggest they had ever seen."

Oliver Townend, on the first of his three rides, Michael McGrath's Dromgurryh Blue, posted the perfect pathfinding round. Taking



Oliver Townend provides the perfect pathfinding round – taking all the direct routes – on Dromgurryh Blue, who finished top of his three rides in 11th

AFTER CROSS-COUNTRY

1st

Michael Jung on
La Biosphere-Sam FBW (GER)

2nd

Tim Price on
Ringwood Sky Boy (NZL)

3rd

Jonelle Price on
Classic Moët (NZL)

all the direct routes, it was virtually faultless, and will have settled Mark Phillips' nerves. He was 14 seconds over the time on a horse built for power rather than speed, which showed the time might be gettable.

In fact, it was a while before anyone went quicker.

Willa Newton, 18th to go, gave an eye-catching display of riding on Newmarket Vasco One to finish seven seconds over the

clear round with 2.8 time-faults. It was a thriller of a day right to the end – Oliver Townend, having guided the inexperienced Samuel Thomas II round with just 12.8 time-faults despite a run-out at the corner in Capability's Cutting, set off on Armada knowing he could snatch the lead from Michael.

Until they got to the Trout Hatchery, it was the round of their lives. Armada's power and huge stride ate up the course. But approaching the Trout Hatchery the old horse just shook his head a little and started to argue for the first time and, despite a fairly smooth trip through the first three elements, cocked his jaw and ran out at the final brush. It was totally unnecessary of him and as ungenious as when he did something similar at the Dairy Mound in 2013.

Oliver still brought him home with just 1.2 time-faults, but in 18th place overnight rather than first.