

Happy hunting ground

Oliver Townend has enjoyed a lifelong association with the Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials. Andrew Baldock discusses his hopes for this autumn's Event



OLIVER TOWNEND

Townend first attended the Lincolnshire four star showpiece in 1984 – two months before his second birthday – to watch father Alan compete in the glorious grounds of Burghley House. Twenty years later, he made a competitive Burghley debut on the stallion Weston Justice, and in 2009 he won it with Carousel Quest after finishing almost nine penalty points clear of a trademark world-class field.

Little surprise, then, that 32 year old Yorkshireman Townend's love of the place has not diminished one bit as he prepares for another assault on a title that has been New Zealander Andrew Nicholson's exclusive property aboard the superlative 16 year old grey Avebury since 2012.

"I remember going to Burghley to watch my dad ride there in 1984, and I went to Burghley on and off as a child. The first time I rode there was in 2004. It was long format in those days, so things were very different then," Townend said.

"Burghley has got a fantastic, friendly atmosphere, and for me, it is a proper, proper four star in terms of the surroundings and the atmosphere, and it takes a very special horse, in my opinion, to win Burghley. You can win a lot of the other four stars on very good horses, whereas to win Burghley it takes an exceptional horse."

HAPPY MEMORIES

Townend enjoyed a stellar season in 2009, which began when he claimed the Mitsubishi Motors Badminton Horse Trials title aboard Flint Curtis and ended with him being crowned HSBC FEI Classics champion a month after helping Great Britain win European team gold in Fontainebleau alongside William Fox-Pitt, Tina Cook and Nicola Wilson.

Just three weeks before the Europeans, though, Townend completed the remarkable feat of winning Badminton and Burghley in the same year on different horses, as Carousel Quest held the lead after dressage and never lost it.

"I remember going to Burghley in 2009 feeling unbelievably happy with the way things were," he added. "The horse was extremely fit, very established and a very good horse. There was no question about his stamina or his ability."

"He'd had major soundness issues throughout his career and he was a relatively new ride for me, but at the same time, I remember feeling very happy going into Burghley that year. Carousel Quest had had issues in the spring, but he was eighth in Kentucky, and that's how it worked out that we would take Flint Curtis to Badminton and Carousel Quest to Burghley."



"Carousel Quest led from the start and won it by almost nine marks. His previous rider, Cressida Clague-Reading, did a very good job of producing him and I was lucky enough to get the ride after she gave up competing. He had soundness issues when I got the ride on him, and it just took a lot of management and help from my vet Neal Ashton. It was a big team effort to get the horse fit and keep him on the road."

Townend, top-ranked British rider last year and consistently rated among the world's top 10, will arrive at Burghley in September after seeing his four star options potentially enhanced by the arrival of two established high-level performers – Fenyas Elegance and Lanfranco – at his Gadlas Farm base in Shropshire to join the proven campaigner Armada.

Fenyas Elegance was previously ridden by Irish Olympian Aoife Clark, and the combination had great success with three star victories at Blenheim and Bramham, in addition to landing the Festival of British Eventing's Advanced Championship at Gatcombe. Lanfranco, meanwhile, was originally ridden by Bettina Hoy, before Andrew Hoy took the ride. Lanfranco has been a top 10 finisher at Burghley and Barbury, but the 15 year old can also be an exceptionally challenging horse, as proved by a dressage elimination at Burghley two years ago.

Townend's class and quality has already surfaced with both horses, guiding Fenyas Elegance to third in the Saumur CCI3*, before a solid display at Barbury International was followed by selection for the 12-strong Great Britain squad

DID YOU KNOW... >

FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT THE LAND ROVER BURGHLEY HORSE TRIALS

Oliver has been to Burghley every year (apart from 2005) since 2004, and has finished with a top 10 placing four times: 2009 – first with Andrew Cawthray's Carousel Quest, 2010 – fourth with Carousel Quest, 2012 – fourth with Paul and Diana Ridgeon's Armada, 2014 – eighth with Armada

OLIVER TOWNEND

that will contest the Longines FEI European Championships at Blair Castle in September. Lanfranco posted a clear round inside the time at Bramham CCI3* and Townend is relishing the opportunity of working with two unquestionably proven rides.

"Armada will be at Burghley this year if all goes well," he said. "I've also got a couple of other options, possibly Drumgurry Blue, which is a relatively new horse, but he has been good in his three stars."

FINDING THE KEY

"Armada, Fenyas Elegance and Lanfranco have all got a serious amount of history to them. None of them are easy horses at all, otherwise I wouldn't have the ride on all three of them, but at the same time the one good thing is that talent is not the issue, it's just trying to find the key to them."

"Fenyas Elegance has proven very quickly that she can do it again. She's obviously had a bad run of things recently, but we didn't have her long and she was third in Saumur, which was a very good result. We were happy with her performance in all three phases, and she was pretty unlucky not to win it."

"Armada we all know, and Lanfranco I think is a fantastically talented horse. He has lost his way completely, and he is not really going to retire to a young rider or be a happy hacker. He is going to be a problem all his life. The agreement is that when I've got the horse he will be with me for the rest of his days. He gave me an unbelievable ride at Bramham. He was in control most of the way, and I felt very good."

"All the horses are very different, and I have a

different plan for all of them. Lanfranco has become quite strong, but my plan with him is not to touch his mouth at all until absolutely necessary. By fence three [at Bramham], in my mind he was running away with me, but he seemed very good with his legs and I can pick up distances from a long way out."

"The likes of Armada and Lanfranco are slightly on the edge of running away with you – their cruising speed is perhaps just a little bit faster than most people would be comfortable with. But if you let them go at their own pace, which might be faster than you are comfortable with, then they do actually start to settle."

ESTABLISHED ROUTINE

Townend currently has around 35 horses at home – he will ride about 12 a day when not competing – and an established team underpins one of Eventing's most consistently successful operations.

"We do a work list every evening, which has on it various names of staff members – which ones are down to hack, which ones for lunging, which ones for the gallops. We work it backwards from every Event," he added.

"There are around 11 people working on the yard, including two people in the office. We've got a young rider from Finland, Veera Peltokangas, we've got a Belgian rider Stephanie D'Andriment, who was fourth at Saumur and hopes to go to the European Championships this year, and we've got Swedish rider Ellen Svennerstal, so it's a multi-national team."

There is not much English spoken at home!

"In terms of my own fitness, riding that many horses, I have to be careful. Naturally, I am quite strong and heavy, so I am just very careful altogether. The other thing is that I only sleep in November!"



Previous page: Oliver with proven campaigner Armada

Above: Oliver takes his first win at Burghley in 2009 with Carousel Quest, who was produced to four star by Cressida Clague-Reading

Opposite: Oliver talks to Clare Balding and Burghleytv after his 2010 round at the horse trials, where he finished fourth with Carousel Quest

PROVISIONAL TIMETABLE

2015 Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials, 3-6 September, Burghley House, Lincolnshire

Sep 3: Dressage (9.30am-5pm, main arena); 12.30pm, working dog display
 Sep 4: Dressage (9am-5.30pm, main arena); 12.30pm and 4.30pm, dressage display with Fardis Ellberg
 Sep 5: Cross country (11am-5pm)
 Sep 6: Final horse inspection (9am, main arena); 10.30am, show jumping; 2.30pm, show jumping; 4pm, presentation of prizes

Advance ticket prices

Membership £175; four-day admission ticket £53; four-day car parking pass £30; Caravan/car parking pass, £52; Thursday/Friday/Sunday admission (interchangeable on those days) £14; Saturday admission, £26; Thursday car parking, £10; Friday car parking, £10; Saturday car parking, £10; Sunday car parking, £10; Thursday/Friday/Sunday coach/minibus/admission ticket, £8; Saturday coach/minibus admission ticket, £15

For advance tickets: 01933 304744, or order through the Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials website www.burghley-horse.co.uk

On the gate ticket prices

Thursday and Friday, £17; Saturday, £28; and Sunday, £15