



# Oliver Townend

The 33-year-old eventer tells Lucy Higginson why he believes he's come of age as a rider — and why he's 'embarrassed' never yet to have been to an Olympics

IT may be the end of a long eventing calendar for Oliver Townend (he doesn't take time off mid-season and is forever on "starvation rations" to keep his weight down) but there are reminders of the high points on his kitchen dresser: the Gatcombe open championship trophy and his Event Riders Masters (ERM) winner's sash.

His ERM series victory (and £74,000 cumulative winnings) was the more remarkable for having been secured with a sensational string of results on Cillinbradden Evo (Gary), from whom Andrew Nicholson fell and broke his neck at Gatcombe last year. The horse is as complex as he is talented, says Oliver. "You cannot make an ounce of a mistake because you end up on the floor,"

he explains. Indeed, he did so at Barbury. "I took a lot of criticism after that fall," reveals Oliver. People urged him not to ride the horse, including, it transpires, Andrew himself. "He told me not to bother with it and I went against his advice," says Oliver. "We have an honest and very good friendship and sometimes we have a difference of opinion." But Oliver learned from Barbury.

"From that point on my whole mentality changed towards the ride that I gave him — you have to decide at what speed you are going for the terrain, and if it costs me a class because I have to do something different, so be it." The horse has improved plenty too, he adds, though he's reluctant to explain the secret to this, just saying "...changes to his fitness work and management".

**A watershed year**  
IN many ways, Gary is a typical Townend ride — think of other complex horses he's taken on from others, like Lanfranco and Fenyas Elegance. But Oliver hopes this year marks a watershed: "I've probably done the longest apprenticeship of riding people's chuck-outs in eventing, and proven again and again that I can have success with horses who've lost their way a little with other top-class riders. But now it's time for a change — at this stage I am desperate to attract new owners who want to be in it for the sport."

To see yourself as an apprentice seven years after you've won Badminton and Burghley is surely nonsense. But as he elaborates further, Oliver pretty much hits the nail on the head: "It's probably made me suffer in many ways because if that's what you ride, that's what you get sent. It's basically how I've made my career."

There is conjecture that eventing is facing a big period of change — the arrival of the ERM series; a new British performance director shortly; and the future career of leading names like William Fox-Pitt looking uncertain — and that's all right by Oliver. "I like change," he says. "A lot of people are worried by it but I think we all needed a fresh start from every point of view in eventing."

Though wholehearted in his praise for all that Yogi Breisner has achieved, Oliver thinks a more obvious time for him to step down might have been post-2012, and that the future successors to the likes of William Fox-Pitt, Pippa Funnell and Tina Cook are not altogether obvious; people who are as hungry as they are talented. It's not hard to imagine who he has in mind when he talks about some who "think they've made it in the sport, but in fact

they haven't. They concentrate on all the wrong things. I'll sound like an old fart, but they're all flash on their websites and social media, but they forget to win classes."

Interestingly, he points to the refreshing factual reality injected by the equestrian data team EquiRatings, whose staff sometimes interrupt gushing commentary to point out things like: "Actually, if you look at their record, these two are weak showjumpers." The ERM series opens the door, he believes, to the sport "separating into two halves" with many top horses being focused on these lucrative CICs instead of stamina-sapping four-stars.

"You'll get specialist four-star horses and specialist ERM horses," he says. "It's created a sport for horses that don't quite get the distance over 11 minutes — it's a chance for them to appear more often and become big superstars."

**A 'disheartening' Rio omission**  
OLIVER'S absence from recent British teams evidently rankles.

**'A lot of people are worried by change but I think we all needed a fresh start from every point of view in eventing'**

"I'm almost embarrassed to say I've not been to an Olympics because I've won a lot and been to championships. It's a bit ridiculous," he says.

With perhaps uncharacteristic diplomacy, he says his ride MHS King Joules' omission even from the longest for Rio was "slightly disheartening".

"I'm not saying he should have made the team, but his form at the time was much better than some on the longest. He is top-class but he's had too many riders. He needs time to settle."

Though he still rides several horses owned by his long-term supporter Andrew Cawthray, who has always been

transparent about his commercial interest in the sport, it's clear that Oliver would like to be riding fewer, better horses, who might not be for sale, in order to fill those gaps in his CV while continuing to Hoover up whatever prize money is out there.

And with his "apprenticeship" complete, perhaps the plain-speaking Yorkshireman with the reputation for rattling cages might find himself at the heart of British teams. **H&H**  
● NEXT WEEK: producer Astrid Bolton

## IN PICTURES



Top: Oliver and Cillinbradden Evo gain their first ERM win, at Gatcombe's British open Middle: celebration time — Oliver (centre) sprays Paul Tapner as he's crowned the inaugural ERM series champion at Blenheim Palace, having finished runner-up there Above: the 'top-class' MHS King Joules heads for a top-10 place at Houghton CIC3\* in May