

'Andrew has a unique ability'

Oliver Townend explains what he admires about the Badminton winner

I REMEMBER the first time I met Andrew Nicholson like it was yesterday. It was at a two-star event at Dijon in 2001. I'd watched him ride since I was seven or eight — I didn't know why at the time, but the only people I wanted to watch across country were Andrew and Mark Todd. Oh, and Ian Stark because he was northern like me and so I thought I knew him!

I heard this clip-clop behind me, and he rode up alongside me, said, "My name's Andrew", and put his hand out. I shook it, but couldn't say anything. He said, "What's your name?" That has always stuck with me.

When I was 18, I was working for Kenneth Clawson, whose partner Paul owned Mr Smiffy, who won Burghley with Andrew in 2000. Andrew only

Oliver Townend won Badminton and Burghley in 2009. He has been the leading rider in Britain for the past three seasons and is the reigning Event Rider Masters champion.

OPINION

rode Mr Smiffy at events, and I ended up riding the horse on the flat at home. Andrew said to Kenneth and Paul that Mr Smiffy felt much better to ride, and asked what was happening at home. They told him, "The boy's been riding him."

When I set up my own yard, just before my 21st birthday, Andrew was very supportive. He's been an unbelievably good influence; I was shy, and a bit nervy and insecure, and he would always find a way of being positive. He treated me like an adult and with respect.

His greatest attribute is his work ethic. We have a similar mentality to work; wherever he grew up in New Zealand must be like where I grew up in Yorkshire. It is inspirational for someone 22 years younger than him, as I am, to know that he is still getting out of bed at the crack of dawn to ride horse after



horse after horse and therefore that's what I've got to do too.

It is difficult to explain what he does across country, but I've ridden lots of horses after him and they can all do that something extra, which Nereo demonstrated when jumping out of The Lake. He read the question, saw that he needed to adjust himself,

shortened his stride while still in the water and met the final element perfectly. Andrew has a unique ability to be strong and to dominate a horse, but also to allow them to take time to judge what they want to do and to allow them to do that while staying on the exact line he wants them on. Somehow he teaches them to make their own decisions while remaining utterly under his control.

I won Badminton in 2009, and in 2010 AP McCoy finally won the Grand National. I remember saying to Andrew that all that we needed was for him to win Badminton as well — I didn't realise it was going to take so long! It seemed unfair almost that he hadn't, given what he had put into it.

Now he really has won everything that anyone who sets out to make a living in the sport could, I suggest that he retires immediately and gives me Jet Set IV and Swallow Springs! **H&H**