

Oliver Townend

The Yorkshireman tells *Catherine Austen* how winning Burghley marked the end of a tough year — and why clinching the big ones is what really matters to him

BIG wins are about gambling. Not the sort where you stick a pin in and hope to strike it lucky; professional gambling, which is about staking your judgement and ability against everyone else's.

Oliver Townend's Burghley triumph in September illustrates this. He brought a young horse with two fairly soft CCI3's under its belt to the world's strongest CCI4*, and won. It wasn't a fluke, or a lucky bullseye; with his knowledge of himself and of the horse, Oliver knew he had the right hand of cards.

His immediate, and enduring, internal reaction was as much relief as elation. He was proved right, in his assessment of himself and the horse.

That validation was important. Oliver puts more pressure on himself than perhaps anyone else in the sport, and his drive and desperation to succeed are possibly best likened to AP McCoy than to anyone else in eventing. Although the eight-year gap between Oliver's first Burghley win on Carousel Quest in 2009 and his second on Ballaghmor Class in 2017 is not really comparable to the 15 years it took AP to shake the Grand National monkey off his back, there is a similar feeling

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of a burden being lightened, if not lifted.

"I have been completely overwhelmed by people's reaction. You can't imagine what it has been like," says Oliver. "And for the first time it felt genuine. People who I didn't think even liked me have been coming up and saying how good it was."

He is smiling as he says this, a real smile that lights up his face. Burghley was the catalyst for a change; the start of a new period in his life.

He explains: "It's been a tough year. One of my best mates in the world was killed in an accident on the Friday morning of Burghley last year. This is the ending of a difficult year and things have been good since."

There was no huge party.

"I was ill all week at Burghley — I spent Saturday night throwing up — and we just came back home, watched it on telly and went to bed.



Oliver riding Cooley SRS for the gold medal-winning British team at the Europeans this year



Oliver at home at Gadlas Farm, Shropshire, with Ballaghmor Class, his Burghley winner

'People who I didn't think even liked me have been coming up and saying how good it was'

"In 2009 we went straight to my nearest friend's house and had the wildest, most ridiculous party imaginable. I woke up on the sofa, was driven to the train station, and went on *Ready Steady Cook*, wearing the same clothes," he remembers. "But life is different now."

"I've done what I've always said I was going to do and cut down the number of horses in the yard — 12 went the week after Burghley. It's been refreshing because it has all been done in the right way — in a grown-up way — and people have taken it very well."

A medium-sized, manageable number of horses, with the emphasis on quality and promise, is every top rider's goal, but it is difficult to achieve. The answer, he believes, lies in attracting the right owners — those who can and will back him in the long-term.

"Being a truly professional event rider in England is a numbers game to a certain extent and it isn't the horses you want, it's the people. There's a large pool of good riders, a lot of them foreign, who are fighting over a small pool of owners. You want the person, rather than necessarily the horse, and hope that person will invest in you."

A GAIN, like AP McCoy at a similar stage in his career, Oliver's intensity of focus brings insularity, and when something like Burghley — or the National — brings the rest of the world flooding in, it can come as a shock.

"I'm very self-critical, but I didn't look at myself from other people's point of view," he says. "I don't read about myself, I'm not into the internet, so I have just looked at myself in terms of how I ride. I only realised that recently."

He's talking about the gap between his perception of himself and how other people see him. After that Badminton-Burghley double in 2009, aged 26, there was a naive expectation that that was it — he'd be winning four-stars left, right and centre. But it always, always comes down to horsepower.

"I never crossed my mind that other people didn't understand what I was riding at times. They just think you turn up at a four-star on a four-star horse, and then it is about how good you are as to where you finish. I didn't know that they couldn't see whether I was riding a top-class one or a moderate one."

There's hardly been a drought in the intervening years — Oliver won more, nationally and internationally, than the majority of riders do in an entire career. He is Britain's undisputed number one. And his biggest achievement is his ownership of Gadlas Farm, while most riders — unless they are fortunate enough to be able to base themselves at their family home — are like gypsies, renting somewhere for a period, moving on as circumstances dictate.

"When people say I've been in the wilderness, I'd like to march them up the drive and say, 'look at this,'" he says, gesturing at the immaculate, warm and welcoming house and yard.

But winning the big ones is what really matters — for the business and for Oliver's own self-belief.

"To me, Badminton and Burghley are the

most important events in the world, over any championship. I'm English, I grew up watching those events, I grew up knowing that my dad had ridden at Burghley and I was very proud of that," he says. "That was my first sentence as a child. I was nearly two: 'Where are you going?' 'Going to Burghley.'"

"It's hard knowing you are capable of winning these classes every single time on the right horse. I suppose it's human nature but I ended up looking back, thinking what was the value in selling Land Vision [who won Badminton in 2011 with Mark Todd], what was the point in doing it all, to an extent? What was I doing wrong not to attract the owners with the right horses?"

His spot on Britain's gold medal-winning team at the Europeans has caused another piece in the puzzle to fit into place.

"That's another thing I didn't realise until recently: how important it was to other people that I was on the team. I was on my first senior squad when I was 22 [the Europeans at Blenheim in 2005]; I didn't know how other people saw the significance of teams. I had 50 text messages when I was selected for the team this year, just saying 'brilliant'. From this point on, I will feel like I have let myself down if I don't make a team."

And thus he piles the pressure back on his shoulders. Oliver, with his talent, work ethic and ability to win, should be the compass point round which the British team pivots. Let's hope he gets the support to make that possible. **H&H**



A weight off his back: Oliver wins Burghley 2017, eight years after his previous win here

NEXT WEEK

Eventer Sarah Bullimore, who finished second at Pau CCI4* this year