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Townend masters Kentucky again

'We've always believed in him': Oliver Townend celebrates back-to-back Kentucky victories aboard Angela Hislop's Cooley Master Class

The British world number one becomes the fourth rider to defend the Kentucky title successfully

By PIPPA ROOME

Land Rover Kentucky, USA

OLIVER TOWNEND achieved back-to-back wins in the USA's flagship event, returning with the talented but fragile Cooley Master Class to scoop the honours again.

Unlike last year, Oliver led throughout. He said the final showjumping round — in which he had to jump clear to win — was the most pressured he'd ever ridden.

But Angela Hislop's 14-year-old Cooley Master Class is extremely careful. As Oliver put it, "If he even touches a fence he does so very, very lightly and spends the next six apologising." And with the rider doing his job impeccably, the \$100,000 (£100,600) cheque was his.

Kentucky last year and Oliver joked after cross-country: "He's probably enjoyed it more than me this year — he dosed in the dressage and ran off with me round the cross-country!"

After the win, Oliver said: "Let's just hope he makes it back next year. He's been our pet since he was four years old because he's spent more time off than he has in work. We've always believed in him hugely, but he's had a

Kentucky debutant Felix Vogt closes out a year in the US by finishing sixth for Switzerland



Boyd Martin is best of the home side contingent as he finishes second aboard Christine Turner's 'gypsy little trier' 'Tsetserleg'

chequered career with niggles."

A horse who has long periods off injured requires faith and careful care. His rider paid tribute to Cooley Farm's Richard Sheane, Andrew Cawthra in who first bought the horse for Oliver, current owner Angela Hislop and the team at home.

Boyd Martin took second and the US national five-star title with Christine Turner's 'Tsetserleg'. This was a redemption after a stop at the World Equestrian Games last year, but the horse has come out this year more "seasoned" and finished on his dressage score here.

"Tsetserleg isn't the fanciest horse — he has an awkward jump and you have to put him in the right balance," said Boyd. "But he's a gutsy little trier. If you put him in the vicinity of the jump, he'll jump it."

New Zealand's Tim Price started as the live contender in the Rolex Grand Slam after a Burchley win last autumn. That dream disappeared, but third on a clean sheet with his own, Trisha Rickards and Nigella Hall's Xavier Faer marked a return to form for a horse who hasn't really lived up to his promise since he was third at Badminton 2017 (see box, below).

There was further British success with fourth for Piggy French, on Jayne McGovern's world team gold medalist Quarrycrest Echo. And US-based Brit Leslie Law returned to this level for the first time since 2010, finishing 10th with Tre Book's Voltairre De Tre. Piggy and Leslie showjumped clear.

Doug Payne moved up two places with a showjumping clear to land fifth on Vandiver for the home side, while his compatriot Phillip Dutton had eight faults in the final phase to slide to seventh with Z.

Sandwiched between them in sixth was Kentucky debutant Felix Vogt (Colero), a Swiss rider who has spent a year in the USA but now returns to Germany, where he is likely to pick up training with Michael Jung again.

PERSONAL BEST

THE defending champions pulled out all the stops in the dressage for 24.1, a 4.6-penalty improvement on Cooley Master Class's best here last year.

The pair's work was rewarded with three nines and plenty of eights, with the only blip being the first flying change, which the horse rather rushed through.

Thursday's sunshine gave way to cold, windy weather on Friday.

TALKING POINTS



PONY CLUB CHAT

OLIVER TOWNEND thanked the Pony Clubber minding the dressage exit (pictured, above) — and got more than he bargained for: "She announced I'd sold her mum a horse and she was happy with the way it was going. I asked if her mum was ready to buy a new one yet!" said Oliver.

FULL BROTHERS

VERMICULUS, ninth under Lauren Kieffer, is a full



'HE WAS CROSS-TIED FOR MONTHS'

XAVIER FAER, third under Tim Price, had most of last year off with injury. He was turned out in a field with a pony he had known all his life at his co-owner and breeder Trisha Rickards' home when his companion kicked him and fractured his leg.

"He was cross-tied for two or three months for his own welfare and then he also had a soft tissue injury," said Tim.



brother to Snooze Alarm. Lauren's first Kentucky ride in 2010. Both are Anglo-Arabs by the Arab stallion Serazim out of thoroughbred mare Wake Me Gently (by Unpredictable).

Lauren was the only rider to complete on two horses, also taking eighth on Paramount Importance, who was a European team silver medalist with Ludwig Svennerstål in 2017.

WINNING SIRE

RUNNER-UP Tsetserleg is by the Trakehner Windfall 2, who won the short-format division at Kentucky under Darren Chiacchia in 2004, the year the event ran both long and short format sections.

EMOTIONAL RETURN

ALLIE SACKSEN, 30th, was the first person to complete the cross-country, riding Sparrow's Nio (pictured, below), by the Connemara Grange Finn Sparrow. This was an emotional return to the top level for Allie after having her daughter Annie last January.

"I'm a one-horse wonder, but he's one wonderful horse," said Allie.



But this was to Oliver's advantage with the sometimes "ridiculously lazy" Cooley Master Class.

"I could have done with a bit more of a gallop with a bit more of a gallop in his backside at times!" he joked. "I wouldn't have wanted it any warmer. I went in there and he went to sleep on me."

Piggy French was worried that the weather had worked against Quarrycrest Echo, whose dressage day routine involves a loose lunge — during which he was "moononed on" — and then just 20 minutes working in. He felt "cold and stiff" in the warm-up.

But after a spook at the flowers in the first corner, he settled down in the arena for 27.1 and second.

"I'm relieved there were no big mistakes," said Piggy. "He doesn't have the best trot, so he needs to be as relaxed and up as possible to get sevens and 7.5s."

Boyd Martin cruised into third, scoring 27.0 on Tsetserleg, while Thursday's leader Felix Vogt held on to fourth with 28.

FAR FROM SOFT CROSS-COUNTRY day over Derek di Grazi's track kicked off with three falls.

Pathfinder Caroline Martin (Islandwood Captain Jack) and her US compatriot Buck Davidson (Park Trader) both fell negotiating the straight route through the corner of the Normandy Bank (fence 20abc). Buck suffered a broken collarbone.

In addition, Liz Halliday-Sharp's Deniro Z — who shared fifth after dressage with Xavier Faer — fell at the first Turning Oxer at fence three.

ARIEL GRALD

ARIEL GRALD (pictured, right), 30, jumped through the second and third elements of the Rolex Grand Slam Challenge with a flag caught between her knee and the saddle.

"He got a bit distracted and drifted right at the first triple brush approach, so I whacked the flag with my knee and it got stuck," said Ariel.

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She finished best of the home side first-timers in 12th with Anne Edröge's 10-year-old Leamore Master Plan, whom Ariel chose in Ireland as a five-year-old.



Piggy French demonstrates some gritty riding across country to pilot her world gold medal-winning ride Quarrycrest Echo to fourth

But there was only one further fall all day and in the final analysis there were 26 jumping clears from 37 starters. Only four made the time, one of whom was Will Coleman on the ex-racehorse Tight Lines. He was the sole rider penalised under the controversial 15-penalty rule for missing a flag.

Felix Vogt incurred 6.4 time-faults to drop from fourth to sixth. He set out fast, but Colero turned — during which he was "moononed on" — and then just 20 minutes working in. He felt "cold and stiff" in the warm-up.

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HAZEL SHANNON

HAZEL SHANNON (pictured, above), 26, travelled from Australia to compete in the Rolex Grand Slam Challenge, having won Adelaide four-star (now five-star) in both 2016 and 2018.

"I'd done Adelaide four times and wanted to do another five-star, plus if you want to represent Australia [at a championship], you have to leave the country," said Hazel.

Sadly a trip up the step out of the lake resulted in a run-out at the subsequent brush and put paid to a clear for Hazel, who finished 26th.

long because he did something unexpected, but every time he put himself between the flags," he said.

But Oliver never looked out of place, while giving the horse the freedom he clearly wanted. Oliver took the time to balance him on the way home as he had lost a front shoe, and added one unplanned long route when he threw a huge jump into the final water. They finished three seconds over the time to hold their lead.

The three clears inside the 11min 20sec optimum time came from Tim Price, Boyd Martin and Phillip Dutton.

Xavier Faer doesn't jump in the most organised fashion, but he tried hard.

"I watched his Badminton 2017 round this morning, to get my eye in and to be inspired by what he's capable of," said Tim.

Boyd and Phillip egged each other on to take the straight route through the Normandy Bank, which had barely been used since the early fairs. Both did so successfully.

"We've completed and he finished well, but it wasn't what we hoped for or what I'm used to with him," he summed up.

Oliver found Cooley Master Class keener than usual.

"He had some of his own ideas and a few times I was sitting behind him with my reins too



US-based Brit Leslie Law and rising star Voltairre De Tre finish 10th

"It was hard work all the way," said Phillip. "I thought the course walked a bit soft, but it was far from soft."

SMALL ENTRY

JUST 42 pairs started, the smallest field for some years. A few horses have been kept back for the Pan Am Games — an Olympic qualification event for the USA and Canada — but no one could really explain the short start list.

Nevertheless, there was quality at the top and, with the FEI's change of star levels for the 2019 season, Oliver Townend will always be able to claim the honour of winning eventing's first five-star competition. H&H

RESULTS

COOP-L-1, Cooley Master Class (O Townend) GBR 28.11.2.0-25.3; Tsetserleg (B Martin) USA 27.9.0.0-27.0; 3, Xavier Faer (F Price) NZL 30.0.0.0-30.8; 4, Quarrycrest Echo (P French) GBR 27.1.6.0-33.5; 5, Voltairre De Tre (L Law) GBR 30.9.11.2.0-48.1.