

Eventing world number one **Oliver Townend** speaks to **Andrew Baldock** about one memorable year



ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Oliver Townend at his yard in Dudleston Heath, Shropshire



As an Olympic year prepares to dawn in 'the Land of the Rising Sun', so dusk has descended on another stellar season lit up by his sustained brilliance. Life is good for Oliver Townend. Throughout his career – one that gained lift-off when he won Badminton and Burghley in the same season on different horses 10 years ago – Oliver's results have screamed from the rooftops. And 2019 was no exception.

A victorious defence of the Kentucky title in April was followed by a second successive runner-up finish at Badminton, then third at Burghley. It extended a remarkable sequence whereby podium places have been secured in seven from his last nine five star appearances, including three firsts and three seconds.

Little wonder, then, that he ended the campaign as world number one, having displayed further evidence of enviable strength-in-depth horsepower headed by the superstars of his Shropshire yard: double Kentucky champion Cooley Master Class and Burghley winner Ballaghmor Class. Throw in a fourth European team medal – silver at Luhmühlen alongside Piggy French, Pippa Funnell and Tina Cook – and the 37 year old Yorkshireman is arguably at the peak of his powers.

“I'm lucky to have people who can do things just as well as I can”

WILL TO WIN

The trademark winning mentality has never left him, while the calmness and composure with which he goes about his work offers a perfect accompaniment to a competitive edge that is always razor-sharp.

Not even a mid-season fall and subsequent broken arm could deflect Oliver. An enforced absence from the saddle ensued, yet such is his outlook that he was still able to grasp positive elements from it, regroup and finish another memorable campaign with a flourish.

“It's all very, very good,” he said. “The horses have all performed as they are meant to again. They've proved that they come out from the yard again, again and again and show consistent form all the while. Somebody said that in my last nine five stars, I've been out of the top three only twice, which highlights that consistency.”

“They are a wide range of different types of horses. Angela Hislop [owner of Cooley Master Class and co-owner of Ballaghmor Class with Karyn Shuter and Val Ryan] has been to seven five stars in her life and never been outside the top three. I'm not sure that has happened for an owner before.”

“Cooley Master Class obviously seems to like Kentucky! He is a horse that we just quietly get ready for the big competitions. He is not a horse that chases around the one day events. We always believed in him as a high-class horse, and we get him ready for the big ones, and every time he has performed since being at the top level.”

“We haven't seen the best of Ballaghmor Class, or the best of a lot of horses that are already producing top five star results. It's hard to say we haven't seen the best of Cooley Master Class when he has only done two five stars and won them both, but he is still progressing.”

TEAM TOWNEND

It is exhausting just to glance over Oliver's work and competition schedule, let alone contemplate how to tackle it, which is why his team at home in the leafy north-west Shropshire village of Dudleston Heath mean everything to him, not only as vital cogs in a well-oiled machine, but as people.

Dudleston Heath was once the residence of Charles de Gaulle's family during their exile from France during the Second World War, but the most well-known occupant these days is a rider understandably proud of his world ranking, but also fiercely supportive of those who help make it possible.

“It's about having people at the yard who are mature and know the job well enough,” he explained. “I'm lucky to have people there who can do things just as well as I can do them. The three main people have been with me for seven, eight and nine years, and they know the way we run things. It is a very established set-up now.”

“We are doing fewer one day events, I suppose, but the place probably runs just as well without me as it does with me, which is why I can literally rock up at an event, get on and get the results, and not be worrying about what is happening at home.”

“The work lists are endless, the organisation is endless. Work lists are done two, three and four days at a time, and it is about being organised. Becky Evans runs the yard and staff, while Karyn Shuter helps and advises with sponsors, owners, event planning and training – I'm lucky to have those two in charge as they certainly know what they are doing.”



Left: Oliver and Ballaghmor Class at the Mitsubishi Motors Badminton Horse Trials 2019, where they came second
Below: Oliver credits his team for his success

FUTURE TARGETS

While the whole Tokyo 2020 Olympic selection debate is for another day, Oliver leaves no doubt about his desire to make the team and how experiences of major championships have helped mould him into what he has become.

“I'm very ambitious [for the Olympics],” he says. “It's a dream I haven't achieved yet. If I do go, I want to go and be extremely competitive. I don't want to go just for the sake of ticking a box and saying ‘I have been to an Olympics’ – that doesn't interest me.”

“When you are younger, you worry about what people think and what direction things are going in. You worry about outside factors, but not now. Yes, I should have won an individual medal at the European Championships, but I didn't. I was very happy at the Europeans, I was very relaxed within myself, I was very pleased with the horse I was riding. Sometimes, things don't quite go your way, and sometimes they do. I'm ready to go on any team they put me on now and enjoy it, and I think I'm mature and experienced enough to help with the performance side of things.”

“Mentally, I'm very team-orientated. When I'm not at a competition, I'll often ring one of them and give some guidance like ‘the right side of the water is riding better than the left side’. I'm interested in the sport, so even if I'm not on a horse myself at somewhere like Bockolo [the Netherlands], I'm going to be watching it on the live stream to see who is doing what. It's very different when you are at a competition and in the thick of it – you are not always able to see everything clearly.”

As for that fall, he added: “It probably cost me a few bits and bobs, but I don't think we missed too much and it also taught me that I do survive if I don't go to an event every third day. I took a lot of positives out of it. Surprisingly, it hasn't bothered me quite as much as people might think it did.”

And what about the season overall? “It has been a testing season in some ways, but at the same time you can't get to the end of the season, finish it as world number one and be complaining about a broken arm or a sore back.” Wise words from a rider who is clearly on top of their game and appreciating every moment. ↗

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Such headline-grabbing performances mean a lot to the yard, too. “The yard is the most consistent yard at the highest level in the world at the moment, and has been for a long time, and that's why the world ranking is what the world ranking is. The horses' form has never dipped.”

“The results are great for the yard – they lift everybody up and show they are doing their jobs right. As I say, there are people at that yard who have worked there for a long time, but nobody in eventing would even know they existed. It's nice for them. I'm the lucky one who gets to enjoy the big occasions while they are home working, so it's just very good for them to see the horses go out and perform and progress the way they do.”

“You have got to remember that a lot of people who work here have known the now famous horses since they were three and four years old, and hopefully that is what this place is about – a place where we can get results out of any horse more consistently than any other yard. At the same time, we have a long line of other horses coming through. I can't wait to see what else is to come.”

