

Britain to win – but don't relax

The new format means anything could happen, but Britain should be strong, says H&H eventing editor Pippa Roome

THIS is the most unpredictable Olympic eventing contest of our time, for two reasons.

The first is Covid-19, which has meant that riders' competition patterns have been disturbed, horses have had a quiet time and most people have stayed national for events, so we haven't seen pairs from different countries head-to-head as much as usual. There are notably more older horses at these Games and fewer younger ones; not many people have had the opportunity to push a fast-developing nine-year-old on to Tokyo.

The second is the new Olympic format, which pits teams of three against one another with all to count, accompanied by a raft of confusing substitution rules (see p4). One mistake will take a team down and it's very possible that three mediocre performances will propel a surprising nation to the podium, while one of the big guns steps aside because their two excellent scores are marred by a slip-up from the third pair.

A GAINST that backdrop, Britain start as favourites. They field three potential individual medallists. In fact, it's a mark of Team GB's extraordinary strength in depth that alternate Piggy March (Brookfield Innocent) could be on the podium individually if called in.

The riders – Laura Collett (London 52), Tom McEwen (Toledo De Kerster) and Oliver Townend (Ballaghmor Class) – are all Olympic debutants, but also all five-star winners on their Olympic mounts. They could well all be



Oliver Townend shows his emotion as he claims victory in Kentucky – will he and Ballaghmor Class have more to celebrate in Tokyo?

top 10 after dressage and none of them have an obvious weakness.

Data analytics company EquiRatings say the British squad is the second strongest Olympic team ever, beaten only by the Germans at Rio – it's worth noting they finished second (to France), so ratings can't always predict a result.

Germany and Australia will probably provide Britain's closest competition for the spoils. Defending champion Michael Jung starts as individual favourite with European individual silver medallist Chipmunk FRH, and Sandra Auffarth is another potential individual medallist for Germany with Viamant Du Matz. Only Amande De B'Neville's inexperience prevents me from saying she could be a podium finisher for Germany's third rider Julia Krajewski.

Andrew Hoy (Vassily De Lassos) and Chris Burton (Quality Purdey) will spearhead the Australian team, backed up by the Down Under-based pair of Shane Rose and Virgil. The latter combination haven't been up against European competition for nearly two years, but they were more than holding their own then.

Great Britain



LAURA COLLETT, 31

HORSE: London 52, 12
BREEDING: Landos x Quinar
OWNER: Karen Bartlett, Keith Scott & rider
GROOM: Matilda Sayburn-Hughes
BEST RESULTS: first Pau CCI5* 2021; five four-star wins 2018-2021
FORM: these two are riding a purple patch – let's hope it continues
SHE SAYS: "When the selection was made official, it felt surreal that it was happening. It's an unbelievable feeling after years of working towards something and thinking you'll never achieve it. To be selected in a year like this, with the combinations Team GB has, makes it extra special."



TOM MCEWEN, 30

HORSE: Toledo De Kerster, 14
BREEDING: Diarmant De Semilly x Papillon Rouge
OWNER: Fred & Penny Barker, Jane Inns & rider's mother Ali
GROOM: Francesca Gorni
BEST RESULTS: first Bicton CCI4*-S 2021; first Pau CCI5* 2019; world team gold medallists 2018
FORM: experienced and consistent pair who keep getting better
HE SAYS: "I don't know if it's relief I feel at being selected – it's definitely happiness. It's been a long road and we've got an incredible group of horses and riders. Toledo has been phenomenal everywhere."



OLIVER TOWNEND, 38

HORSE: Ballaghmor Class, 14
BREEDING: Courage II x unlisted
OWNER: Karyn Shuter, Angela Hislop & Val Ryan
GROOM: Jess McKie
BEST RESULTS: first Kentucky CCI5* 2021; first Burghley CCI5* 2017; top five in four other five-stars
FORM: his incredible five-star record speaks for itself
HE SAYS: "I've dreamt of representing Great Britain at the Olympics for a very long time. We will try to make everyone at home proud. Ballaghmor Class is a horse of a lifetime. I'm very grateful to his owners and all my team."

PODIUM PREDICTIONS



INDIVIDUAL

- 1 Michael Jung on Chipmunk FRH
- 2 Laura Collett on London 52
- 3 Oliver Townend on Ballaghmor Class

NEW ZEALAND provide a bridge to the next group – on form, one would put them fourth, but the Prices should never be discounted. Their performance is not the easiest to predict; Jonelle and Grovine De Reve made a significant step up at Kentucky and she will hope to repeat that, while Tim's ride Vitali is very new to him but has impressed so far.

The next bunch of nations will be ready to pounce if the gilded quartet falter. World silver medallists Ireland, reigning Olympic champions France and the challengers from the US lead the pack, alongside Japan, who were fourth at the 2018 World Equestrian Games and enjoy a home advantage. This group holds a slight edge over Sweden, Switzerland and Italy.

In terms of teams, that leaves Poland, Brazil, Thailand and China at the bottom of the pack – although the latter does have a potential individual medallist in Alex Hua Tian on Don Geniro.

Prepare to chew your nails, scream at the TV and leap off your sofa – after more than a year in some kind of lockdown, you may want to get in training now for such excitement.