

Tales of Tokyo

With the world's best horses and riders descending on Tokyo, there was action aplenty. *Martha Terry* looks back on those gold medal-winning moments, the ups and downs, and the best stories to come from the Games

As the dust settles, we will look back at the Tokyo Olympics as an unexpected marvel. It was the Games that so nearly didn't happen, yet so gloriously lifted us out of the Covid gloom. There were British medals aplenty, tear-jerking successes and heartbreak, lessons learnt and questions for the future. For now, let's celebrate the joys of the pinnacle of our sport, its athletes, equine and human, and cherish the thrills and emotions they have given us.

BRITISH SUCCESS

THIS was Britain's joint-best equestrian effort at an Olympics, equalling the five medals at London 2012 and two more than at Rio 2016.

Britain's double dressage gold from London may have turned to double bronze, but as Charlotte Dujardin pointed out of grand prix newcomer Gio: "For me, this might be a bronze, but it's really like a gold medal, because I feel 'Pumpkin' has given me everything."

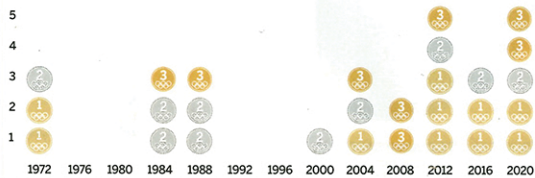
"I have a feeling that our hearts are beating in the same rhythm"

DOROTHEE SCHNEIDER ON SHOWTIME FRH

Gio, Carl Hester's En Vogue and Olympic debutante Lottie Fry (Fverdale) surpassed even their own expectations to take team bronze, these young horses giving great hope for future champions.

Our eventers – Laura Collett, Oliver

Britain's medals won since 1972



Townend and Tom McEwen – were expected to win team gold, but the pressure of having their three five-star winners fit, sound and performing at their best in each discipline on each day cannot be underestimated.

"We came out here knowing we had three of the best horses in the world – horses of a lifetime – and that's why we're sat here with a gold medal," said Laura. "It's a relief to get the job done."

After cross-country, with Oliver taking the lead on Ballaghmor Class, Laura third on London 52 and Tom sixth on Toledo De Kerster, we dared to dream of an unbelievable full house of medals. But Tom's silver medal to go with the team gold was still a fantastic result. All three finished in the top 10. Tom, Laura and Oliver, you were a class apart.

Britain's showjumpers had more of a rollercoaster ride. All three individuals – Ben Maher, Scott Brash and Harry Charles – qualified for the final, where Ben's victory on Explosion W was dazzling.

"I've had many good horses in my career, but I won't ride another one like him," Ben said. "I saw one distance from a long way back and he grew wings for me."

Following on from Nick Skelton's Rio gold, this is only the second time in history that a nation has produced back-to-back Olympic jumping champions.

Despite Scott's Jefferson being out due to minor injury, Ben, Harry and Holly Smith still managed to qualify for the team final, but their challenge

3 fences in hand: the eventers' massive winning margin

The British eventing team break a 49-year drought for gold: Oliver Townend, Laura Collett and Tom McEwen celebrate

disintegrated as a massive, technical track proved too taxing for many of the world's top horses after an intense multi-day effort.

THE FORMAT DEBATE

THE jury was out on the new three-to-a-team format, with no drop score. Prior to the Olympics, the general view among riders was negative. It was easier for the average spectator to follow the sport, and ramped up the excitement. But did it have implications for horse welfare?

The pressure to complete for the team's sake meant some showjumpers may have felt obliged to continue even when their horse was draining confidence, such as Shane Sweetnam, whose horse Alejandro fell. Several showjumpers have spoken out on social media about the format, declaring it to be unfair on both horse and rider.

Ireland, Israel and Japan were eliminated due to non-completions. Harry Charles described it as "carnage – no riders are in favour of it".

Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum, team bronze medalist in Rio, but not competing in Tokyo, posted on her Instagram: "The stress I felt just watching made me feel such empathy for my colleagues in Tokyo and for their horses. Imagine facing [many] obstacles just too big to conquer, yet having the weight of your nation on your shoulders? How can you decide between your nation and your horse? This decision is too monumental for any human being. It is unfair. We have experienced just as exciting Olympics with the old format in years past. Please bring back the drop score. We owe it to our animals."

While it didn't have severe repercussions in either the dressage or the eventing, it created a few niggles and what-ifs. If the dressage had been run under the same format as in Rio



with multiple success in Japan

Team gold medalists Oliver Townend and Ballaghmor Class give Britain the best possible start on cross-country day with a confident clear in the time

