

# Townend is pure Class



## Oliver Townend wins a third consecutive Kentucky, this time on Ballaghmor Class, leading the European-based riders' dominance in a competitive week

Land Rover Kentucky, USA

By NANCY JAFFER

FANS of the Kentucky Three-Day Event always knew it was special, but this year's edition really proved their point, highlighted by a memorable, unflinching performance from Oliver Townend and the equally tenacious Ballaghmor Class. Oliver became only the second person, after German superstar Michael Jung, to win the event three times in a row. The world number one was part of a contingent from Britain, New Zealand and Australia who flew over for the five-star at the Kentucky Horse Park and went home with all but one of the top ribbons.

After the cancellation of most of the world's major competitions since the spring of 2020 due to Covid, competitors on both sides of the Atlantic were hungry for a chance to assess their horses' prowess in a genuine test of fitness and athleticism. They got it in a setting that Harry Meade, taking part for the first time, called, "The most British park you could find anywhere in the world. Lovely rolling green hills. You can't help but be inspired."

However, the five-star was nearly cancelled for the second year when organisers felt they lacked the resources to run it without funds from ticket sales.

Trying to keep things safe during the pandemic, the US Equestrian Federation barred the general public from all its licensed competitions. But when Equestrian Events Inc. said that protocol meant it couldn't run the competition, eventers and others who love the sport came to the organisation's aid, raising enough through donations to make sure the show could go on.

It did, but as a bare bones version of the fixture that normally attracts 80,000 visitors during a five-day run, complete with scores of trade stands, places to eat and sponsor pavilions for a winning atmosphere that led to the event being called "the best weekend all year".

None of those amenities were

available this time around. There were loads of empty seats in the Rolex stadium, where a few were bizarrely filled by cardboard photo cutouts of people who paid to have their image attend in their place.

Even so, Oliver said, "The stadium itself is the most special stadium in the world for eventing. When the pressure's on, it still feels very, very much like the place we want to be at. Of course, we love a big crowd and we miss the crowd, but at the same time, it took nothing away from the competition."

### "NOT A DRESSAGE SHOW"

TWO days of dressage ended with the USA's RF Scandalous and Marilyn Little in front on

21.7 penalties, followed by her compatriot Tamie Smith aboard Mai Baum (21.8) and Oliver with Angela Hislop's two-time Kentucky winner, Cooley Master Class.

Ballaghmor Class - who belongs to Karyn Shuter, Angela Hislop and Val Ryan - was fifth after his test, behind Boyd Martin of the US on Tetsesleg TSF, his runner-up from the 2019 Kentucky renewal. But as Kentucky veteran William Fox-Pitt advised, "I don't think it will be a dressage show," and he was right.

William, who has also won Kentucky three times - although not consecutively - called the cross-country layout designed by Derek di Grazia "unrelenting" after walking it. That assessment proved accurate.

Derek, who is producing the route for the Tokyo Olympics, set

Left: "He was jumping exceptionally," says Oliver Townend of Ballaghmor Class, who won his second five-star at Kentucky and recorded his sixth top-five placing at the level

Above: Harry Meade, making an extraordinary comeback from a serious head injury last autumn, pilots five-star debutant Superstition (fifth) to one of only four clears inside the time

Right: Phillip Dutton, the last US winner here, takes eighth on Z

Below: Boyd Martin drops into the Head of the Lake aboard British-bred On Cue, finishing best of the home side in fourth



Australian Kevin McNab and Scuderia 1918 Don Quidam jump clear inside the time across country, ultimately finishing in sixth place

an intense test that demanded attention from start to finish. Oliver called it "tough, tough sport. It should be for a five-star. It's very easy in this day and age to get carried away about dressage marks, but at the same time, we always get very strongly reminded at these places that it's a three-day event. It was his job to build a five-star and he definitely did that."

New Zealand's Tim Price and Xavier Faer finish on their dressage score to secure the runner-up spot, the horse's third podium place at five-star



William, who fell with Oratorio at the middle section of the Mighty Moguls with only two more fences to go until the finish. Boyd had a fall there as well with Tetsesleg, his third horse.

Boyd also fell at the iconic Head of the Lake water complex with his first horse, Long Island T. He then went back to the barn and took an ice bath, a technique he has used to ease the pain from various injuries accumulated over the years. On his next mount, the

Meanwhile, Oliver had problems when Cooley Master Class, his two-time Kentucky winner, lost a shoe on course. He went from third to eighth after amassing 6.4 time-penalties. Ballaghmor Class also lost a shoe, at the seventh fence, which was problematic as rain pelted down for the last quarter of the 63-starter competition. Amazingly, he accumulated just 0.8 of a time-penalty, with Oliver contending that had the shoe

## "He has an extra gear in comparison to most horses"

OLIVER TOWNEND ON BALLAGHMOR CLASS

five-star debutante On Cue, he had just 0.8 of a time-penalty, the same as Oliver, who went into the lead with Ballaghmor Class on 27.3 penalties, 0.5 ahead of Boyd. Marilyn, meanwhile, lost her lead when she gave Scandalous a break and slowed down in the middle of her run to add 28.4 time-penalties and dramatically sink to 32nd.

Tamie had 11 penalties when Mai Baum broke a fragile device at the rail into the Park Question, a rail-ditch-arrowhead combination. With six time-penalties, she went down to 18th. Both women, like Boyd, are candidates for the US Olympic team.

stayed on, he might have been 10 seconds within the optimum time of 11 minutes.

"I'm still very emotional about how amazing they both are; they both have given me their hearts and souls today," he said of his horses after his rides. "Cooley Master Class didn't have a smooth trip at all, but every time I gave him a squeeze, he put his head down and did what he could."

Sadly, a small cut meant Cooley Master Class wasn't able to pass the final horse inspection. Ballaghmor Class slipped a lot in the rain on cross-country as Oliver worked to keep him on his feet, but what enabled him to keep going was "his tenacity and

his ability and his strength and complete robustness to do the performance that he did." British eventing performance manager Dickie Waggood said Kentucky is now "on a par with Badminton and Burghley. I think Derek did a really good job. A five-star is a five-star, it's not meant to be a four-and-a-half-star."

In regard to riders who were unable to conquer the route, he noted, "I think some of them just weren't ready." Aside from William's fall, he commented, "I'm very pleased with the way our horses went." Ballaghmor Class was, of course, the ultimate in that context.

"He's come and done what I thought he would do. It wasn't the way that I believed he would do it, but we got there in the end," Oliver said, referring to the horse's slightly disappointing dressage mark and tough cross-country round due to his lost shoe.

Oliver noted too how pleased he was that British selectors and team management were at the competition watching his horse, so they could "actually see and witness him being at his toughest" to earn "another feather in his cap" and, hopefully, a trip to the Olympics.

"He has an extra gear in comparison to most horses, so when you think, 'Oh, he really can go,' he used to go when you didn't want him to go, like it was more his choice than the rider's. He has an extreme amount of power, an extreme amount of talent and now he's very, very professional."

Only four riders were able to produce a double clear cross-country: Harry with Superstition, Australia's Kevin McNab (Scuderia 1918 Don Quidam), Jonelle on her 2018 Badminton winner Classic Moet and her husband Tim on Xavier Faer, third at Kentucky in 2019.

### "PRESSURE IS FOR CAR TYRES"

THE showjumping played out with plenty of drama over a course put together by 2008 Olympic designer Steve Stephens, making his debut in the post usually held by Richard Jeffery of Great Britain, who stayed at home.

The first to produce a clear inside the time was 2004 British Olympic individual gold medalist Leslie Law on Voltaire De Tre, who moved up from 34th to 26th. There would be seven more, including Jonelle on 2018 Badminton winner Classic Moet (seventh) and Tim on his own,

Right: Tamie Smith and Mai Baum are second after dressage



Jonelle Price and Grovine De Reve rise from 20th after dressage to finish third, jumping clear just one second over the optimum time

Trisha Rickards and Nigella Hall's Xavier Faer (second) - the only pairs in the competition to finish on their dressage scores. Boyd had a rail that dropped him from second to fourth with On Cue, but a single rail would have put Oliver, the leader, into fourth.

No toppled poles were in the cards, however. Oliver jumped clear and turned after the finish line, raising an arm in triumph, then bowing his arm as he finished on 27.3 penalties. The relief that swept over him came after a few tense moments, but he's used to handling that.



get him in a position to clear the fences. But today he was jumping exceptionally, so it felt like he wasn't going to have a fence down."

In addition to a bevy of prizes, including a Land Rover, a Rolex watch and confectionery from presenting sponsor Mars Equestrian, Oliver collected \$50,000 (£36,000) - not an inconsiderable sum, although much reduced from the \$130,000 (£93,000) Oliver won in 2019, due to the event having to run behind closed doors.

Jonelle was third with her own and Therese Miller's Grovine De Reve, the former ride of New Zealander Daniel Jocelyn, who competed the gelding in the 2018 World Championships.

Despite an unfortunate rail, Harry Meade finished fifth on his own and Mandy Gray's five-star first-timer Superstition. It was a brilliant performance, especially when considering that Harry has had a long recovery from an October accident in which he was dragged, destroying his helmet and leaving him with a brain injury.

Kevin McNab was less than one penalty behind Harry in an impressive effort, while Jonelle rounded things out for the travellers from abroad with a seventh-place finish on Classic Moet.

No American has won the competition since 2008, when Phillip Dutton took the honours, and many people are still trying to figure out why the home side can't get it done.

Boyd, who has come closest in the past four years, has a theory.

"To win it, you really have got to have a crack at it. Some of the Americans just want to finish. I'd rather crash and burn trying to win. There's no shame in failing if you're going for broke." H&H