

# An all-time great

"He's a proper event horse," says rider Oliver Townend, as Ballaghmor Class's second Burghley win propels him to legendary status



DEFENDER BURGHLEY 2023

## FINAL PLACINGS

- 1st Oliver Townend** (GBR) on Ballaghmor Class  
**2nd David Doel** (GBR) on Galileo Nieuwmoed  
**3rd Harry Meade** (GBR) on Cavalier Crystal

Oliver Townend pilots the superstar Ballaghmor Class to the horse's second Burghley win, six years after his first, and heads an all-British top three with a rising star in second



An all-British podium: Oliver Townend leads the celebrations with David Doel in the runner-up spot and Harry Meade in third

Defender Burghley, Lincs

By PIPPA ROOME

FOR some years now, when asked about Ballaghmor Class as the horse racks up yet another top five-star result, Oliver Townend has replied, "What can I say about him?"

He means, of course, not that he has nothing to say about this truly incredible partner, but that the horse's record speaks for itself. Last week, the 16-year-old blasted through Burghley to nail his third five-star win. Let us recap the rest of that remarkable CV.

Ballaghmor Class was a five-star winner on his debut at the level, at Burghley in 2017. Since then, he has won Kentucky 2021 and finished in the top five at five-star on no less than seven other occasions, plus he's an Olympic team gold medallist.

"I think every event suits 'Thomas', but the tougher the better," said Oliver, summing up why perhaps Burghley has been his happiest hunting ground, with second and third places here as well as two wins.

"He's a proper event horse. If they brought back long format tomorrow, he'd still come out on top. He's a fighter and his pedigree and mentality help hugely. Whatever era you put this horse in, he'd win."

The Irish-bred, owned by Angela Hislop, Val Ryan and Oliver's right-hand woman

Karyn Shuter, is by Courage II, bred by Noel Hickey. Over the years since he won that first Burghley as a green 10-year-old, Thomas's grey coat has become increasingly peppered with freckles; he is now so flea-bitten as to be almost chestnut on the top of his angular, strong, athletic body. His long, narrow, serious face has taken on a wise and knowing expression.

He knows his job, he's the king and he's seen it all. How many other horses have won at the top level six years apart? One – La Biosthetique-Sam FBW, who landed five-star wins seven years apart. How many other horses have, in six-and-a-half years, not missed tackling a top-level long format event in any spring or autumn?

Ballaghmor Class's only "year off" was the Covid-struck 2020 and his extraordinary roll call of rosettes is only made more remarkable by having spanned the pandemic years – he could easily have two more stellar results on his write-up without that.

"Mark Phillips is a selector and he said, 'Do you think you'll retire him now?' and I said, 'No, we're going to the Olympics next year,'" said Oliver. "He's sounder than ever,

going better than ever, so why not? Whatever competition you put him in, he's always there going into showjumping, so why not?"

## THE ULTIMATE COMPETITOR

OLIVER himself is a rider who attracts strong opinions, positive and negative. He has made a few bad decisions over his 20-plus-year career (who hasn't?) and has an on-off relationship with the media – he knows what he says hasn't always come across well, and has consequently become guarded and cautious at times. He can also be great fun – and as emotional as any of us about his horses, as seen in his tears when asked about Thomas in post-win interviews.

"Karyn says I'm not allowed to say this is the best five-star in the world but it is – this is my favourite followed by Kentucky and Badminton, in that order, and with the Olympics right up there as well," he said at the final press conference, showing one tiny part of the role Karyn Shuter plays as eyes on the angular, gatekeeper, advisor and so much more.

Whatever you think of Oliver, few can deny he is the ultimate competitor, a supreme professional who demonstrates a consistency and ability to turn in results again and again that is unrivalled in the current sport. This is his seventh five-star win, which puts him seventh on the leaderboard of all-time five-star victories, with three of those at Burghley as he also won in 2009 on Carousel Quest.

"I'm so proud of Thomas and of the team behind him," he said. "The main gang have all been with me for between seven and 14 years. Horses don't lie and if you're doing something wrong from a management point of view, they don't turn up at five-star after five-star, with smiles on their faces, sound, fit and producing the results they have over the past 10 years."



"Last year, we didn't win a five-star and it was the same year I joined Cauntton Stud as their rider, so we've been trying to figure out if everything is at being done the way we want it done with two yards two-and-a-half hours apart. This cement that the teams at both yards are doing all the right things."

"I knew I had a class horse under me"

DAVID DOEL

the Cauntton investment, I have a lot of horses coming through. It's an incredible position and I feel privileged to be part of this amazing sport. If I could take you all to where it started, you wouldn't quite believe it."

## ONE DRESSAGE SCORE FINISH

"TD rather be one place further up!" joked runner-up David Doel at the final press conference.

"Forget it," retorted Oliver. And yet, when all was said and done, David was just 0.7 of a penalty behind the winner Sitting 25th after dressage, he added nothing to that score and became just the ninth competitor to finish on his

"If they brought back long format tomorrow, he'd still come out on top. Whatever era you put this horse in, he'd win"

OLIVER TOWNEND ON BALLAGHMOR CLASS

Championships in 2026.

All that is in the future. For now, whether he goes to Paris or not, Ballaghmor Class is one of the all-time greats and we salute him.

was particularly expressive and active in trot, let down only by his walk – never his best pace.

"The test wasn't quite as tight as it can be, but he's fitter than he's been for a few years," said the Olympic double medallist.

Between Tim and Tom were Oliver Townend's two rides, on identical scores of 24.2. Swallow Springs was Thursday's leader after a neat,

consistent, rhythmic test, while Ballaghmor Class looked loose and active – and could have pipped his stablemate had he popped his off hind down properly in the mid-test halt.

"Both are blood, sharp horses, but in very different ways," said Oliver. "Swallow Springs is light on the floor, light-framed and a bit swallow-like. Ballaghmor Class is more



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the 16-year-old would be "fine", he too wouldn't showjump the next day.

With Toledo out of the running, only penultimate runner Oliver Townend could challenge Tim Price for the lead. Ballaghmor Class was as professional as ever, but 4.8 time-faults left him behind Vitali, although the gap had closed so the New Zealand combination did not have a fence in hand.

"He's a freak of nature; my hero and horse of a lifetime," said Oliver. "He's not showing his age – he was keen, keen, keen."

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HARRY

whole team," said Harry, whose 0.4 of a time-fault on Away Cruising left him 27th.

Wills Oakden and Oughterard Cooley dropped a single rank with the last part of the treble down, finishing fifth.

## "LUCK WAS WITH US"

AS the action moved to the overnight top three, David Doel and Galileo Nieuwmoed lived up to their strong form in this phase to add nothing to their dressage score.

"We had a couple of rubs but luck was with us, unlike at Pau last year where we lost the lead," said David. "He was magic."

Ballaghmor Class has always been a horse who can have one down, but that spiralled at last year's World Championships



when he had four. But he was clear here all the way to the last, where the front rail of the over came down. But he and Oliver Townend could afford this and hold second – and Tim Price still had just one fence in hand.

Vitali's showjumping record is dicey – he had had 12 faults at all three of his five-stars before this week.

"He wants to do the right thing, but sometimes he leaves the building for 30 seconds mentally," said Tim in advance of the round.

The word number one was "desperate for the worm to turn", but it wasn't to be. The horse hit the wall at fence three, plus the front rails of the music notes over at fence six and the red and blue spread over a water tray at fence 10.

"It's super-disappointing and the gravity of that will come on in the following hours," said Tim, who dropped to fourth.

"If I could choose a horse to sit on today, it would be her"

HARRY MEADE ON THIRD-PLACED CAVALIER CRYSTAL

Winner Oliver summed up Ballaghmor Class's performance, saying: "Everyone says this phase is the chink in his armour, but it's because he always gets himself in a winning position. He's often jumping in the worst ground and I think his other two phases are strong enough to forgive him the occasional fence down."

"He's a true event horse – he's brave. At a couple of fences yesterday I thought I had a good distance and he wallowed them, but he still has a smile on his face. His bravery makes him not the most careful, but as long as I keep doing my job and he keeps doing his, his form says the rest and I love his form."

Ten top-five placings at five-star – who are we to argue with that? **H&H**

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# Overall: final scoreboard

DEFENDER BURGHLEY HORSE TRIALS 2023

Final position	Horse and rider	Dressage	Cross-country Jumping	Time	Showjumping Jumping	Time	Total
1	Ballaghmor Class (Oliver Townend, GBR)	24.2	-	4.8	4	-	33
2	Galileo Nieuwmoed (David Doel, GBR)	33.7	-	-	-	-	33.7
3	Cavalier Crystal (Harry Meade, GBR)	32.2	-	5.2	-	-	37.4
4	Vitali (Tim Price, NZL)	18.7	-	8	12	-	38.7
5	Oughterard Cooley (Wills Oakden, GBR)	34.9	-	-	4	-	38.9
6	Majas Hope (Pippa Funnell, GBR)	29.6	-	8.8	4	-	42.4
7	Topspin (Alice Casburn, GBR)	35.8	-	7.6	-	-	43.4
8	Arklow Puisseance (Wills Oakden, GBR)	37.2	-	4.4	4	-	45.6
9	Tuetserleg TSF (Boyd Martin, USA)	28.1	-	9.6	12	-	49.7
10	On Cue (Boyd Martin, USA)	31.8	-	10.8	8	-	50.6
11	Wabbit (Jessica Phoenix, CAN)	34.9	-	10.8	4	1.2	50.9
12	FE Lifestyle (Jennie Saville, USA)	31.1	-	15.6	4	0.8	51.5
13	SAP Talisman (Sam Watson, IRL)	35.4	-	0.4	16	-	51.8
14	Liberty And Glory (Tom Crisp, GBR)	33.9	-	10.8	8	-	52.7
15	Quindiva (Alex Bragg, GBR)	39.7	-	14	-	-	53.7
16	Mama's Magic Way (Will Faudree, USA)	29.8	-	12.4	12	-	54.2
17	HHS Noble Call (Padraig McCarthy, IRL)	34.9	-	14.4	8	0.4	57.7
18	Icarus (Emma Thomas, GBR)	38.5	-	21.6	-	-	60.1
19	DH Purple Rain (Francis Whittington, GBR)	34.9	-	18.8	8	-	61.7
20	MGH Bingo Boy (Nicky Hill, GBR)	36.8	-	21.6	12	-	70.4
21	CMS Google (Kristina Hall-Jackson, GBR)	32.4	20	18	-	-	70.4
22	Bally Louis (Holly Richardson, GBR)	36.9	-	26	8	-	70.9
23	Poetry In Motion (Richard Coney, GBR)	35.2	-	34.4	4	-	73.6
24	Global Fusion M (Lauren Innes, NZL)	45.3	-	24.8	4	-	74.1
25	Valmy Blats (Emily King, GBR)	30	11	30.8	4	-	75.8
26	Milchem Eclipse (James Rushbrooke, GBR)	35.3	11	26	4	0.4	76.7
27	Away Cruising (Harry Meade, GBR)	36	20	24	-	0.4	80.4
28	Shanbeg Cooley (Harry Mutch, GBR)	44.8	20	19.6	4	-	88.4
29	Askari (Matthew Heath, GBR)	32.1	20	64.4	4	0.4	120.9
30	Rebel Rhyme (Tom Bird, GBR)	41.1	20	33.2	24	3.6	121.9
31	LV Balou Jeanz (Sarah Clark, AUS)	37.8	20	43.2	24	2.8	127.8
32	Lordana VH Laysheof Z (Sophie Fouracre, GBR)	41	31	45.2	20	2.4	139.6

**Eliminated first horse inspection** – Skip Mill (Christopher Whittle, GBR)  
**Retired on cross-country** – Swallow Springs (Oliver Townend, GBR) 24.2; Toledo De Kerker (Tom McEwen, GBR) 25.6; Tregilder (Oliver Townend, GBR) 30.5; Class Affair (Zara Tindall, GBR) 31.2; NO Bronze (Harry Mutch, GBR) 32.1; Native Spirit (Louise Harwood, GBR) 32.4; Colorado Blue (Austin O'Connor, IRL) 34.9; Harthill Phantom (Andrew Heffernan, NED) 35.2; Bradeley Law (Michael Owen, GBR) 36; Toronto D'Aurois (Arthur Duffort, FRA) 36.6; Gaston (Tim O'Neill, GBR) 41.1; Harry Robinson (Phil Brown, GBR) 41.2; Viens Du Mont (Luc Chateau, FRA) 42.2  
**Eliminated on cross-country** – Pencos Crown Jewel (Ross Carter, GBR) 26.9; Possible Mission (Tom Rowland, GBR) 31.9; Cancaras Girl (Tiana Coudray, USA) 32.1; Hacienda (Lauren Lilywhite, GBR) 35.2; Credo (Richard Skell, GBR) 38.1; Con Classic 2 (Christoffer Forsberg, SWE) 38.2; Commander VG (Aistis Vikauskas, LTU) 41; Andree Berlin (Julia Norman, ZIM) 41.7  
**Withdrawn after cross-country** – Tenareze (Harry Meade, GBR) 30.1; 5.6; Game Change (Grace Taylor, USA) 28.9; 17.6; Luna Mist (Tom McEwen, GBR) 30.5; 18.8; Ferro Point (David Doel, GBR) 37.8; 20.5.6; Cooley For Sure (Greta Mason, GBR) 32.2; 40.39.2



The riders' briefing takes place in Burghley's Great Hall



Cakes from The George of Stamford for horse and rider



Katie Jerram-Hunnable demo: Jonelle Price tries side-saddle