



An all-British podium: Oliver Townend triumphs on Cooley Rosalient (left) – and becomes a serious contender for the Rolex Grand Slam – while Tom McEwen (JL Dublin, above) and world champion Yasmin Ingham (Banzai Du Loir, right) put in strong performances to slot into second and third respectively

Townend leads British domination

The world number one spearheads a British clean sweep of the podium as he contests his 100th five-star

Defender Kentucky, USA

By PIPPA ROOME

OLIVER TOWNEND achieved a first five-star win for an extraordinarily long-standing owner, made an assault on Olympic selection and set up a Rolex Grand Slam attempt, all in a few gloriously sunny days in the Bluegrass State.

Disappointingly eighth after dressage, he and Cooley Rosalient appeared too far off the pace. But they clawed their

way up, securing victory with a clear showjumping round as their two British rivals ahead of them clipped a fence each. It is hard to believe that "Rosie" is only 10 – this was her third five-star.

"She's tough, female, not mare-y but knows what she wants," said Oliver, who bought her from Cooley Farm himself

as a "raw, stringy" four-year-old. She is by Valent out of the Roselier mare Bellaney Jewel.

"It's rare to see a horse with so much thoroughbred trot like she did. When I found out her sire was jumping 1.60m and her mother won a Scottish Borders National, I thought I was in a dream," said Oliver. "I wasn't in the business of buying expensive four-year-olds and luckily Paul Ridgeon bought her from me two weeks later."

Paul and Diana Ridgeon have owned event horses for some 45 years; they are owners that Oliver "inherited" from Andrew Nicholson.

"Paul wasn't that enthused about paying for her to come to Kentucky, but we twisted his arm and it's his first five-star win," said Oliver. "He's 92 years old so this makes me incredibly happy for an old man, more so than for myself."

This was a 100th five-star start for Oliver – he is only the third event rider to reach that milestone, after William Fox-Pitt and Andrew Nicholson – and an eighth five-star win. He now goes for one of the sport's ultimate prizes in the Rolex Grand Slam at Badminton, after winning Burghley last year.

"I've been in this position twice before and the first time

I nearly killed myself trying to win," said Oliver, alluding to his serious fall when attempting the third leg of the accumulator bonus at Kentucky in 2010. "The second time I came second at Badminton, so perhaps it's third time lucky."

BRITISH TOP THREE

TOM MCEWEN and Yasmin Ingham's disappointment at losing the title in the showjumping was magnified by the incredible pressure of Olympic selection. Both emphasised in their final interviews that they had come to show themselves capable at the highest level and achieved that goal – which is true.

But with Badminton yet to come plus strong combinations tackling the four-star short route, they know the British selectors might struggle to pick a complete trio of horses

Pictures by Amy Drago Photography



and riders from Kentucky. Tom repeated his second from last year on Jo and James Lambert and Deirdre Johnston's JL Dublin. This pair will win a major at some point, and although the story of Tom taking over the 2021 European champion after Nicola Wilson's accident is a path well trodden, it still has emotional pull.

"I've been lucky to get a five-star horse after she put in all the hours of work. I get to tinker around and finalise small details," said Tom after his leading dressage test.

Yasmin has had a roller-coaster ride of gold medals and run-outs with Janette Chinn and The Sue Davies Fund's Banzai Du Loir since second here in 2022. She felt under pressure to deliver against this backdrop and third ticked this box, despite disappointment in the showjumping.

"I'll be analysing that video the whole way home, but you learn from these

"She's tough, female... and knows what she wants"

OLIVER TOWNEND ON COOLEY ROSALENT

experiences and I believe it makes me a stronger rider, a better competitor and a better person," she said.

Germany's Malin Hansen-Hotopp surely secured her Olympic berth with fourth in her first five-star with Carlitos Quidditch K, building on their 2022 Blenheim win and 2023 European team silver.

Lauren Nicholson was fifth and best American on 17-year-old fan favourite Vermiculus, who was a world team silver medalist in 2022 and saved last year for a tilt at Paris.

"I don't want to go just for a completion, I want to contribute to a medal," said Lauren.

MISTAKE-FREE TEST

TOM MCEWEN pulled off a mistake-free performance



Above: ninth-placed Christoph Wahler comes home inside the time on five-star debutant D'Accord FRH. Right: Kirsty Chabert (Classic VI), 19th, pulls off a mark of 31 for sixth after dressage

"I said Maryland was the hardest course I'd ever done and now I think this is," she said. "He just kept saying, 'Sure thing, Mum'."

The only serious accident came a couple of horses later when Quasi Cool came down at the final fence. Rider Phillip Dutton later reported the horse to be resting comfortably, while he piloted second ride Azure round for 15th, his 50th Kentucky completion.

Malin Hansen-Hotopp was held on course with Carlitos Quidditch K, which helped her as he was getting more strung out and she could reset. They finished with 6.8 time-faults.

US rider Mia Farley beat the target while easing down on the thoroughbred Phelps.

"He's just so efficient and after the first couple of minutes I have rideability and we're on the same page," said Mia, who was the only rider in the time at Maryland last year.

She rose from equal 13th to fifth – but four showjumps down dropped her back to 13th.

Two horses later, Germany's Christoph Wahler made the time with five-star first-timer D'Accord FRH, who was ninth.

ROSALENT REIGNS

NO one else could finish penalty-free, but Buck Davidson had just two time-faults on thoroughbred

Sorocaima (sixth) and Oliver Townend was one second over on Cooley Rosalient.

Oliver said: "Every distance that I wanted, I just about got – like the second pond [Cosequin Cove at fence 8ab], a few have done five strides there and I said, 'No, we're going to make four happen. One day you're going to be at Burghley, you're going to have to learn now' and she's just incredibly honest."

He went long at the final difficult combination, saying: "I'm conscious that although I'm trying to be competitive, I'm also trying to half produce and half save her. She's as good as we've always hoped."

Lauren Nicholson knows

Vermiculus is not the fastest, so "lived a little dangerously", not least jumping the wide part of the corner out of Pete's Hollow.

"It wasn't our smoothest, prettiest round, but it comes down to his experience and what a fighter he is," she said after adding 4.4 time-faults.

Having shared third with Vermiculus after dressage, fellow potential US Olympic contender Cooley Nutcracker had 6.4 time-faults to sit one spot behind him in eighth overnight, a position he retained in the showjumping.

"I don't know how it's possible a 10-year-old in his first five-star can make it feel easy," said rider Liz Halliday.

The final cross-country leaderboard depended on Tom McEwen's round. The double Olympic medallist described JL Dublin as "incredible" as they clocked four time-penalties to stay in the lead, though without a fence in hand.

"I was cruising the first part, it felt more like an intermediate," said Tom, going on to describe the blip that led to a long route at the EEI Root Cellar at 15abc.

"I let him be a bit free off the drop and came into the first brush arrowhead on a half stride. He was great there and rather than take on that long two strides to the next skinny, I had plenty of time, so I thought I'd go long."

He then had to take another alternative at the Park Question (23abcde), where he found himself in trot when he balanced before this test of rail, ditch and two angled hedges.

Tom said the track was "fair for the horses but very much a rider's track". There were 21 jumping clears from 32 starters (63.6%) and riders praised designer Derek di Grazia; Oliver says he is the best designer in the world. The fact the Kentucky track is beautifully dressed with fresh flowers contributes to it looking more jumpable than other five-stars, but the challenges should not be underestimated. **H&H**



Best American pairing Lauren Nicholson and Vermiculus, fifth