

# Oliver Townend

A man who'd prefer to let his horses do the "talking", the nine-time five-star winner sits down with *Catherine Austen* to discuss the inimitable Ballaghmor Class and why he considers horses his true mates

Oliver Townend with his 2024 five-star winners: Ballaghmor Class (left) and Cooley Rosalent



*"I'm not really an event rider in my head. I just like riding horses. They like me and I like them"*

OLIVER TOWNEND

Pictures by Isabel Pearce Photography and Amy Drago

IT is said that dogs become like their owners, mirroring their personality traits and patterns of behaviour. Half in jest, I suggest to Oliver Townend that perhaps the same is true of him and Ballaghmor Class. Tough, utterly focused and professional in competition, a little bit insecure, loyal, affectionate, wild in their youth, occasionally tricky to handle...?

Oliver raises his eyebrows and says, with a wry smile, "We're very similar. A good friend of mine said that we are the human-horse equivalent of each other, and that's possibly becoming more and more true. I think we are both appreciating the big events more as we get older."

Heading into the 14th year of their partnership, this symbiosis is hardly surprising. It is difficult to imagine one without the other, and their victory at the Maryland CCI5\* last October – their fourth at the very highest level together, and Oliver's ninth CCI5\* win in total – was perhaps their crowning achievement to date, surpassing even that second Burghley triumph in 2023 and their Olympic team gold medal in Tokyo.

In the "character-building" game of snakes and ladders that makes top-class eventing such a frustrating, fascinating sport, Ballaghmor Class – who hadn't skipped a beat in his lengthy career to that point – missed Badminton last spring with a foot problem that took time to clear up.

This denied Oliver, fresh from a Kentucky CCI5\* win with Cooley Rosalent, a clear shot at the eventing Grand Slam, and he and Ballaghmor Class's owners decided to give the horse "a proper, long break".



Behind the top two, Oliver has a string of potential stars hot on their heels

"When he came back, I'd nearly left him too long – I couldn't believe how fat he'd got – and I said he wasn't going quite to be ready in time for Burghley. We've always loved going to Maryland; it was just figuring out how to make that happen," Oliver says.

After a peculiar, difficult summer in which Oliver and Cooley Rosalent were only non-travelling reserves for the Olympics and then he tipped off her halfway round the cross-country at Burghley – the first hurt far more than the second, despite the fact that he was riding with a collarbone that was broken in four places – Oliver and Ballaghmor Class did make it to the US's newest five-star.

Could "Thomas" bring redemption and

give the Townend team a second CCI5\* success to bookend their season? Would this warrior of a horse still be the tigerish force of old?

Of course he was. The canny, flea-bitten son of Courage II looked delighted with himself and his surroundings, paying relatively little heed to his jockey across country with an air of supreme confidence, even arrogance, in his own experience and ability.

"At both his last five-star wins, Burghley and Maryland, I've been on the edge of not being able to hold him," Oliver says, smiling. "You say he gives the impression that he knows it all, and he nearly does – he's getting very clever. At Maryland, I was too 'open' to the log before the massive skinny brush in the ditch and didn't have the distance I wanted, and for the first time he actually shortened the last three strides himself and we jumped it beautifully. That's probably the first fence that's been big enough to back him off in recent years. He's just different, isn't he?"

In the three previous runnings of Maryland, Oliver had twice been in the lead going into showjumping. He had finished second once and third twice, but hadn't won it. To collect, listen and be super-careful is so much to ask of a horse whose raking stride and sheer bravery had been so impressive the day before, but Ballaghmor Class further elevated himself in the pantheon of great event horses with a flawless clear.

Having locked all emotion firmly away – as he always does when riding so he can be completely consistent and clear in his communications with a horse – relief, joy and pride surged out of Oliver



Sensitive, professional, athletic and positive – Cooley Rosalent claimed the Kentucky crown last year with Oliver (pictured)

in the aftermath, unstoppable as the tide and as overwhelming.

Does Ballaghmor Class feel as though he's pleased with himself after something like that, I ask.

"Oh, ridiculous," says Oliver. "He's harder to cope with than I am! It's becoming quite interesting – we didn't do prize-givings with him as a younger horse, because we used to think that it would wind him up. But he's so strange."

"You couldn't put a rug on him here at home and canter him around with it on; he wouldn't like that at all. He'd be pretending to bolt with you. But after he's won a big one, he's happy for me to hang off the side at him galloping around the arena, point at him, do all that celebration stuff, and he's got a smile on his face, happy as a pig in you-know-what."

"At Burghley in 2023, he felt like he was going to deck me on the way into the prize-giving – there's a brilliant video on Instagram of him prancing around in the collecting ring – and then he goes into the arena, stands still, lets me get off him and stands beautifully while it all goes on. Weird, isn't it?"

LIVER isn't always a journalist's dream. Wary of saying the "wrong" thing and of being misinterpreted, he is polite but controlled in his replies, giving you a fair answer to your question but rarely more.

But work through the preliminaries, nip cleanly over the frangible – and flammable – subject of eventing politics and bring him to talking about his horses; their characters, their breeding, how to ride and train them, and you get gold. He relaxes, his face softens, and he is insightful, self-deprecatingly funny, thoughtful and revealing.

The two 2024 five-star winners are stabled next to each other at Oliver's



Gadlas Farm in Shropshire, and their boxes are the two closest to Oliver's house; he can see them from his kitchen window. Apart from their colour, are they alike in any way?  
Oliver pauses.  
"Rosie is probably the opposite to

Thomas. She's a sensitive mare, but still very professional in her attitude. Not as big and robust as him, not as tough in her personality. You could in no way, shape or form ever 'make' her do something; everything is on a light contact. She doesn't take hold of the rein across country, you have to sort of warm her up into it, but she's beautiful to ride and always has been.

"She probably has more athletic ability than Ballaghmor Class. Everything moves a lot more with her than it does with him; she can do things and bend herself round fences in ways he can't."

"She has a very nice personality – she's never not smiling. She's always good. But there's plenty of grit about her as well. I was behind the time a bit on the cross-country at Kentucky because I was trying to nurse her into it, and the course was big early on as well. As with Ballaghmor Class at his first Burghley in 2017, three or four minutes out I pressed 'go' and she was as good and quick – she showed real grit then."

"Her mother was a winning racehorse, and there was no shortage of turn of foot or gears at the end of Kentucky. She's a lot quicker than he is. He's a dour old stayer who has a huge length of stride; I can go

up the gears so much quicker with her, I can 'add' very easily because she's short-striding and very sensitive in the mouth, but I can also land and press 'go' and she ends up in fifth gear in a stride and a half. She's very quick and nippy."

LIVER takes quiet pride in having produced so many five-star horses from the word go.

He explains: "I'm obsessed with the flow of movement, so it takes me sometimes longer to produce them, because I don't have them as submissive as many other riders. They are a bit unruly, and I don't demand they go in a certain way. But I love saying I've had Tregilder, Cooley Master Class, Cooley SRS, Ballaghmor Class, Cooley Rosalent, all from four and all have been really good five-star horses and won or been in the top two at that level."

"That's a pretty good statistic, isn't it, I suppose?"

"And that's the bit I probably enjoy the most: the mundane, daily training. I'm not really an event rider in my head, I just like

riding horses. They like me and I like them. I'd quite comfortably live with horses over humans. That's possibly why I'm not very good with humans..."

"Then when my feet hit the floor and it's gone well or it has gone badly, I can't always suppress those emotions and I'm always beating myself up in my head for whatever it is."

"I've probably got five proper mates in the world," he says, nodding in the

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ON WHERE OLIVER FINDS MOST SATISFACTION

direction of the yard, "but I've got a lot of mates out there."

As Oliver has grown older and matured, he has come to appreciate his fellow competitors more. There was a great photo on social media of Oliver, Tim Price and Boyd Martin having a drink in the airport after Maryland, all heading straight to Pau.

"We were just sad that Austin O'Connor [the 2023 winner] wasn't there, as it would have been four from four at



Far left: as with many of his top horses, Oliver has worked with Cooley Rosalent from a four-year-old. Above: Oliver at home. Left: Ballaghmor Class. "We're very similar; we both appreciate the big events"

Maryland," he says. "I'm very lucky at this stage of my career, and hopefully for some time to come, that Tim and Boyd are there with me, because we get on so well. When one of us wins, we celebrate, even if the others have lost. I think we count each other as good mates – I hope we do."

"I've learnt that no one's journey is the same, and that doesn't mean everyone's opposition, and even if they are, it doesn't mean you can't get on with them."

It might surprise some that Oliver and Harry Meade are good friends – to outward appearances, they are very different. In fact, they play off each other with perfect comic timing, and they really ought to consider a joint winter tour of some sort; it would be hilarious.

"From Venus and Mars," he says, grinning, "but we see the sport in the same way, and we want to maintain that sport."

We have to save Oliver's many and considered opinions on the sport and other subjects such as breeding, the importance of thoroughbred blood and the correct way to stack a dishwasher for another time. He strides into 2025 with Thomas and Rosie heading up his team and a number of the younger horses he rides for Cauntoun Stud jogging behind them, pushing

for their turn in the spotlight. I make him pick one "baby" for us to follow: "I've got a thoroughbred who's turning five."

He's by Network out of a Robin Des Pres mare, and he will hopefully aim for the new thoroughbred class at Cornbury. He belongs to my mother – the first horse she has ever owned with me. It's taken me 41 years to convince her I'm good enough to ride a horse for her!" H&H

**NEXT WEEK** Jump jockey Daryl Jacob on his decision to retire