

Baby's big day

Oliver Townend's young star leads the way for an all-British top 10

THE best was saved until almost last on both dressage days. Near the end of Friday, Oliver Townend showed all his experience to abort his first arena entry when Cooley Rosalent spooked a stride or two before it and then to pilot the grey through a smooth, elegant test.

He didn't draw more than a couple of nines from the ground jury – France's Xavier Le Sauce, Britain's Nick Burton and the US's Robert Stevenson – but received bucketfuls of eights and, crucially, stayed mistake-free.

The end result was the fifth-best Badminton dressage score ever, 21.1, and top spot.

"She went in and brightened up with the crowd. She's still relatively babyish," said Oliver, mentioning that one of the 11-year-old's last arena memories is the lap of honour at Kentucky last year.

"Today was a big day for her, but she coped brilliantly. I took a risk coming out of the first corner and let go and she did go the right direction. It would have been easy for her to stick her head up and goggle around and that would have probably been the end of the test, really."

As usual, the mare was ridden in a nose net. "She's a headshaker, she's

very sensitive and the flies drive her mad," said Oliver.

Oliver also had Ballaghmor Class in ninth on 29.3 – Thursday particularly was characterised by riders being disappointed by their marks, if pleased with their horses.

"He's wild at the trot-up and everywhere else, then comes in here and says, 'I've done enough now!' So he was a little bit lazy, but I'm happy enough," said Oliver of the veteran.

Thursday morning had a theme of horses spooking at the low red camera at the end

of the arena. Gemma Stevens was among those annoyed at its placement, but she was delighted with first ride Chilli Knight, who rounded out the top 10 on 29.5.

"It was an absolute dream to get a

sub-30, but when I heard the first few scores I thought I'd be on 38!" she said. "But that horse honestly did his best shuffling ever."

By the end of the phase, Gemma had joined Oliver with a podium place and two in the top 10, as she piloted Jalapeno into third on 24.7, with a mistake-free test.

"Normally she's almost lazy, but she's been seriously hot to trot the last few days, so I had to ride her slightly tentatively. She was still

"Today was a big day for her, but she coped brilliantly" – a "smooth, elegant test" puts Oliver Townend and 11-year-old Cooley Rosalent in pole position at the end of day two



amazing," said Gemma.

Tom McEwen led on Thursday with 22.4 and ended the phase in second with JL Dublin, their test marred only by a break in the extended trot.

"Tom said: 'We've really saved him so he's been wanting to come out – we've been teasing him by taking him jumping and he's like, 'This is just jumping.' We took him to Hunters dressage on Sunday and he was like, 'This isn't the real deal.' He's a showman and ecstatic to perform."

"THAT'S MY FAULT"

EARLY on Thursday, favourite Ros Canter was trending ahead of Tom until a slight stutter in the first flying change was met with fours across the

'A cleverly brilliant, flowing course'

Cross-country day juggles the rankings, but Oliver Townend and Cooley Rosalent hold their lead

Alice Casburn and Topspin achieve their eighth top-20 five-star result in 17th, up 43 places after dressage



NO one likes to say a five-star is easy before riding it, but riders agreed that Eric Winter's seventh Badminton track was dimensionally huge, but more flowing than in some previous years.

"I don't know if it's as technically difficult as normal, but there are lots of places you could have a frustrating problem," said Harry Meade. "It wheels quite tight, which is good, because obviously the conditions are so fast."

After the dry spring, riders were grateful to the Badminton team for their efforts to provide the best going possible.

With 12 minutes the maximum permitted optimum time at five-star, a target of 11min 40sec meant the track

was one of the longest in the modern sport. And while Badminton is quite flat, the course tends to be more sapping when run clockwise as it was on this occasion, because horses are pulling gently uphill much of the way home.

CLASSIC TICKS A FINAL BOX

KIRSTY CHABERT set a great example on 16-year-old Classic VI, riding forward and taking the majority of the direct

routes, bar a couple of right-handed corners, a type of fence where she has amazingly had penalties. She came home with 22 time-faults to rise one place to 31st.

"Times like that, you're quite happy to be sat on a stroppy black mare"

JONELLE PRICE ON GRAPPA NERA

done all these amazing things and if I'm here tomorrow, I'll be super-chuffed," said

Kirsty, who went on to finish 34th, though she did have to hang on tight when she nearly fell off in the showjumping.

Oliver Townend followed her on the old professional Ballaghmor Class, who flagged up that the four strides from the big drop into the Mars Lake (fences nine and 10abc) to the triple brush arrowhead in the water was quite short. His 4.8 time-faults elevated him one spot to eighth.

"A couple of places weren't quite impressive enough for him," said Oliver. "If he sees a fence he doesn't think much of, he'll just run me through the distance, so I had to correct him or swing off my line a few times. But at the big old-fashioned Badminton

ROSALENT RALLIES TO LEAD

AND so to the final pack. Cooley Rosalent answered every question; she looked to be tiring a little when she chipped in an extra half-stride coming out of the HorseQuest Quarry (fence 28abc), but rallied to finish just three seconds over the time and hold top spot. The rider took the long route into Huntsman's Close after a phone call from his father.

A GOOD DAY'S SPORT

OLIVER hailed this as Eric's best Badminton course yet.

"It was a cleverly brilliant, flowing course that showed off top-class horses and riders and the mistakes that happened weren't horrible or frightening. You couldn't afford to be behind the clock at any point

as it was always going to be difficult to catch up," said the leading rider.

A 56% clear rate, with six inside the time, were pleasing statistics.

"On this footing, that's good enough and it was a good day's sport," said Eric. "I might go back

to something different next year, but this was about getting horses more flowing and open and then watching for the drive-by and that happened a lot. And there were fences that caused problems that I didn't expect."

With Oliver less than a fence ahead of Ros, the groundwork had been laid for a tussle between Britain's Olympic gold medalists, both bidding for a second Badminton title, in the final moments.

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PLACINGS AFTER CROSS-COUNTRY

1st Oliver Townend (GBR) on Cooley Rosalent
2nd Ros Canter (GBR) on Lordships Graffalo
3rd Gemma Stevens (GBR) on Chilli Knight

Top two swap spots

Clears win prizes as a tricky first fence and tight time take their toll

SIX horses were withdrawn before the showjumping including, from the sharp end, Oliver Townend's Ballaghmor Class (eighth overnight), who was sent to the holding box at the inspection and then pulled out, and Rehy DJ, who had sat 14th, denying Yasmin Ingham a debut completion.

The big winners of the morning session were British amateur Libby Seed, up from 25th to 18th with a fault-free performance on Heartbreaker Star Quality, and Alice Casburn, who rose six spots to 17th, jumping clear just one second over the topspin.

Numerous riders before lunch had the first fence on Kelvin Bywater's track down, which was probably largely attributable to its position next to the busy members' enclosure. Alex Bragg – an early falter here in the afternoon as he secured 16th on Ardeo Premier – said that he'd ride it "up half a gear, with a little bit more leg, just to keep their focus" if he had a second horse.

Harry Meade jumped Cavalier Crystal out of order as first of the afternoon session, going clear to finish on their dressage score, which was eventually rewarded with a leap from seventh to fourth.

He said: "It's a clever track, because the time is tight, but you can't take an inside line anywhere. So all you can do is come in a quicker rhythm, but you can't allow the stride length to get longer, because all the related distances are on orthodox to slightly compressed distances."

Bubby Upton and Emily King both fell foul of the short six strides to fence five –



FINAL PLACINGS
1st Ros Canter (GBR) on Lordships Graffalo
2nd Oliver Townend (GBR) on Cooley Rosalent
3rd Austin O'Connor (IRL) on Colorado Blue

"It's a clever track," says Harry Meade – but he Cavalier Crystal go clear inside the time to jump three places and finish fourth



Jérôme Robiné makes his Badminton debut aboard Black Ice, completing in 20th after third at Blenheim CCI4*-L last year

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PLACINGS AFTER DRESSAGE

1st Oliver Townend (GBR) on Cooley Rosalent
2nd Tom McEwen (GBR) on JL Dublin
3rd Gemma Stevens (GBR) on Jalapeno