H&H Hero to Hero

Andrew Nicholson *and* Oliver Townend

"We share the same work ethic": Oliver Townend and Andrew Nicholson in conversation at Oliver's yard in Shropshire

Two of the world's most brilliant event riders discuss how they handle pressure, compare their top horses and how many they ride before breakfast time

Hot on your heels: Oliver congratulates Andrew on the podium of the CCI3* at Bramham Horse Trials in 2016

OLIVER: You've been to six Olympics. What do you remember of your first one, Los Angeles in 1984?

ANDREW: It was great fun. I was 23, and I had no idea what to expect. We stayed in the Olympic Village. Because we rode at about 5am every day before it got too hot, we would be back in time for breakfast and we tried out all the sports facilities – the running track, the high jumps, tennis, you name it. One day we had lunch with sprinter Carl Lewis, and although I recognised him I didn't really appreciate how special it was to bump into people like him every day. I was too young and naïve – now I'd be a bit more aware of it all.

OLIVER: I'm definitely old enough to appreciate things like that!

ANDREW: That was the only Olympics until London 2012 where I spent time in the Olympic Village. Usually we were staying in houses near the equestrian parks, which were always a long way away from the other events. For London we were back in the Village and it makes you realise what an Olympics is – you see wrestlers, boxers, athletes walking around at 2am because they can't sleep, and you appreciate the pressure of an Olympics and what these athletes are putting themselves through, and that's what it's all about.

OLIVER: An Olympic Games is the only championship in equestrianism I haven't been to. Considering the amount I've won at the top level, I find it slightly embarrassing that I haven't been to an Olympics, for whatever reason. I have sold an awful lot of horses that have gone on to go to the Olympics for other countries, and competing there yourself is just something that every athlete at the top of their sport wants to do.

ANDREW: I didn't go to Los Angeles thinking I was going to win a medal – I went there for the fun and the excitement. I was on a very young horse and I sold it straight after the showjumping to stay in America. I just had a good time. Whereas London was the first Games I went to thinking I had a really good chance, and I think that put me in a different frame of mind from the very

Words by Catherine Austen. Pictures by Peter Nixon and PA Wire

Early inspiration for Andrew Nicholson: Bruce Davidson's 1978 World Championship win on Might Tango

beginning. I was very concentrated on doing well, but I also appreciated the Olympic "feel". Between those two Games I didn't really appreciate the Olympics in the way that I should have done, because I didn't feel that I was going to do well.

OLIVER: I suppose your early Olympic experiences were perhaps a bit like my early experiences at Europeans or World Championships. I think as you go through your career you appreciate things more and more – and hopefully you are sitting on higher-quality and better horses as you go on. It becomes a lot more interesting when you think you have half a chance of doing very well, rather than going because you were in the top few in your country, not necessarily in the top flight in the world. Now it isn't just about ticking a box, it's about being competitive when you get there.

ANDREW: Do you feel that the pressure you have when riding some of your really top horses is different than the pressure you have on an average one? I'm sure in your mind you are telling yourself, "You can win this, you can win this," but also you know that horses can let you down. When you have a good one, for me, the pressure is more, but it is a much better pressure.

OLIVER: The whole thing is much more enjoyable on a good one, and it's easy to judge somebody who is riding an average horse around a championship in a negative way, whereas the good ones make you look good, they make you feel like you can ride well, and obviously you end up at the top of the list rather than halfway down it. For me, going to these competitions with good horses and good chances is more exciting – yes, more pressured, but more enjoyable. It's a different world going with a good horse rather than one you are trying to keep on its feet.

ANDREW: I remember Ballaghmor Class as a young horse. He used to look very raw and angular and it reminded me of what Nereo used to look like. I would say, "This is a good one," and people thought I was stupid. Sitting on him, he felt so handsome, but they were looking at a raw, bony, gangly thing with a massive canter. Ballaghmor Class in the early days looked like that. It was a big performance to get on him some days. Now I see him at the big events and he looks very elegant.

OLIVER: For me he looks like a proper horse and would fit in at the top of any discipline. When he's fit he could walk round the paddock at Cheltenham or canter into a showjumping grand prix and not look out of place.

> *"No one came and bought him – a couple sat on him, but there were no takers"*
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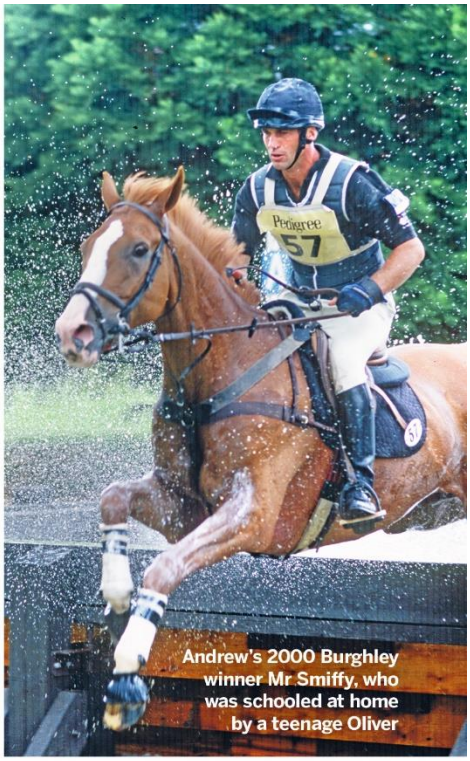
> OLIVER ON BALLAGHMOR CLASS' EARLY DAYS AS AN UGLY DUCKLING



Andrew's 2000 Burghley winner Mr Smiffy, who was schooled at home by a teenage Oliver

ANDREW: Not many modern event riders would have bought him as a youngster, wouldn't you have thought?

OLIVER: Well, no one came and bought him from me! A couple sat on him in the early days, but there were no takers.

ANDREW: I started to watch your riding when you were in your late teens, because you were producing my top horse, Mr Smiffy [on whom Andrew won Burghley in 2000 and finished second in 2001]. He belonged to Paul Davies, Kenneth Clawson's partner, and Janet Oliver, and Paul and Kenneth brought the horse to events for me to ride. I'd known Mr Smiffy since he was five and he was horrible to ride – stiff as a plank. But after I had done a few events on him, I asked Kenneth and Paul who was riding him at home, because he felt different. They said that Paul did a bit, the boy who looks after him hacks him out, and then they said that this boy Oliver gives him a jump. That's when I started watching "this boy Oliver". Now I produce the horses and send them to him – a role reversal!

OLIVER: And I know they'll have late flying changes and no walk. I'm only joking!

When Oliver's Burghley winner Ballaghmor Class was young, Andrew spotted many similarities with his own star, Nereo, at the same stage

Andrew and Nereo, then aged 17, on their way to their hugely popular – and long awaited – win at Badminton three years ago

ANDREW AND OLIVER

ANDREW: My flying changes have improved!
OLIVER: I remember watching you on TV at Badminton when I was eight or nine years old. There were two people I was really interested in watching, and those were Andrew Nicholson and Mark Todd. My dad would watch in silence – he would never talk about who was who – so I was making up my own mind, but right from the word go I was drawn to you and Mark. And the British rider I can remember being really interested in watching was Ian Stark – someone told me he was from the north, and so I thought I knew him... I liked the videos, the *Thrills and Spills* series, the Badminton recordings – from 1986, I could do every single word of the commentary with it on silent. Rewind, rewind, rewind, it would drive my mum and dad mad!

"Watching other people is a very effective way to learn"
ANDREW NICHOLSON

ANDREW: I remember seeing a film of Bruce Davidson at the 1978 World Championships in Lexington. I arrived in the UK a couple of years later and was riding in a novice event, and there was Bruce. I made sure I went to watch his dressage, his showjumping, his cross-country. He spent quite a lot of time in England then and I made sure I watched him as much as I could.

I never used to have lessons – I used to go to events I was riding at and watch other riders, often on young horses. I picked up a lot by watching them on young horses which made mistakes, and seeing what they did about it. Watching other people is a very effective way to learn. Working pupils often ride the way the person they work for rides – and the rider can start picking up the pupil's bad habits as well, through watching them. If you go to an Olympics, where everyone is there together 10 days before the event gets going, everyone's basic riding starts to change, because they are in the company of and watching top riders every day.
OLIVER: It's interesting. At a French event not that long ago, I arrived late from another competition and had two horses to work. It was 7pm, all quiet with no one else riding. Before long 12 French lads were standing at the bottom of the arena, watching. I went and swapped horses and off they went, and when I appeared back on the second horse they came back and stood there again, watching. Not on their phones, or chatting, but watching.

I was always told that you treat people in the way that they treat you, and that's probably why you and I get on so well. We have the same work ethic. I used to ring you up early in the morning, or at certain points during the day, to find out how many horses you had ridden that day so far.
ANDREW: I used to lie in bed and tell you I was on my 10th!
OLIVER: It worked because I still get up at 4.30am! I had eight ridden – young ones, mind you – by 9.45am in January.

By the mid-1990s Andrew Nicholson was rivals with his childhood hero Bruce Davidson

ANDREW: It was never my dream to be a rider. I only rode because I could make money out of it, not by winning prize money but by selling horses, even when I was very young. And then I learnt to shoe, so on a Monday to Friday I was a farrier at a polo place before I left school. Those sort of things got me into the horses.
OLIVER: My dad was a very good horseman, and we had nothing but young horses or ones that were difficult. We started to do more and more breakers, and he built what had been his hobby into quite a big business. But he was desperate for me to get a trade behind me: "People like us don't event, that's for the rich crowd, we work for a living..." so he sent me to a dealer's yard to learn how to buy and sell and break, I went to the farrier and learnt how to shoe, learnt how to do horses' teeth. We did everything ourselves, and I'm not sure how many of the younger riders could do that now. I had a long apprenticeship in horses before I was able to be an event rider. When I left school, Dad said to me, "We've taken you as far as we can."
ANDREW: He was good to encourage you to go and get out, rather than try to keep you at home. Keep doing what you're doing, and if you get to Tokyo, enjoy the Olympic dream – don't get totally hooked up on just winning. **H&H**

Picture by Bob Thomas Sports Photography/Getty Images
Aboard Kahlua at Los Angeles 1984, the first of six Olympics at which Andrew has competed