

Tom Rowland

The event rider is quietly making a name for himself at five-star, as upping his horsepower, growing his confidence and learning to take risks pays off. He talks to *Pippa Roome*



"You live off the high of a good Badminton for a long time," says Tom, pictured on his top five-star ride, Dreamliner

"I WAS not some amazing, glistening young rider. I've always thought I'm probably about five years behind. But that's fine – I'll just go on five years longer. I'm quite stubborn about it."

So says Tom Rowland, who achieved a breakthrough result with seventh at Badminton last season, aged 33, and backed it up with 12th there this year.

These Badminton results are fitting, because it is the event that inspired Tom's career, through attending every year while growing up near Tetbury.

"Both my parents were teachers, but Mum rode and my gran bred Arab horses, so I probably inherited it from her. My younger brother Barney rode briefly, but there was a moment at a Pony Club show where he lay in the grass in horse wee, so that ended his riding career quite early," says Tom.

But for Tom, there was never any option except a life in eventing.

"I have always been quite pig-headed about it, and I was convinced I was going to be an event rider. I absolutely loved the horse," he says. "Looking back, I can't believe how naive I was and how horrifying some of my riding probably was."

During his teenage years, he played hockey from school, biking to Nathalie Rozard's livery yard in Cirencester Park. After A levels, he spent two years as a working pupil with Angela and Mike Tucker.

"Then when I was about 20, I set up a yard in Andoversford, near Cheltenham – I can't quite believe I did that, but I did. I was there for about five years and had six or seven horses and some liveries," he says.

"Then Samantha Alberto, who I'd met when I did some work experience at Aston-le-Walls, let me know that she and her husband Ross had bought a place in Cirencester. They built a brand new yard and in 2017 I moved in."

"People would say I'm stuck in a renting hole, but it is a good hole to be in. The thought of moving terrifies me. I need to feel safe and settled, and so I'm very lucky to have that. The yard is beautiful, the horses are – I think, I hope – happy there. We have amazing off-road hacking and know how to get horses fit from there."

"Samantha and Ross are genuinely the most supportive people. Running a business is not easy, and they're very flexible – allowing the place to be busy when it needs to be busy. There are 20 horses on the yard, including some

liveries, and I do quite a lot of teaching." The backbone of Tom's team is yard manager Effie-Anna Christakou and travelling head groom Georgina Dobbin.

"I split those roles a few years ago and it works well. Effie is rare, because she doesn't particularly want to be away – we got her to Badminton for half a day and then she was like, 'Right, I'm ready to go back home now.'"

THROUGH his 20s, Tom was "chipping away", without being spectacularly successful.

"I got a lot of experience and now I'm conscious of trying to turn being an also-ran into having a system that helps me get



Left: Tom schools the promising youngster He's A Contender, pausing to greet five-star ride Quintilius (above) afterwards. "I think he's got a proper five-star result in him," Tom says of the 13-year-old



better, more competitive results," he says.

That upgrade is about Tom's own confidence, as well as horsepower. His first horse was Hennessy Corm ("He's still in the field at home, aged 21 who took him from Pony Club camp to completing his first five-star, at Pau in 2015.

"I was 14 and he was five when I go him and he didn't want to go on the bi Looking back, I feel embarrassed – he would have a lot of fence down – but he gave me a taste of an honest horse tried his hardest," says T.

He was followed by tl "proper cob" Possible Mi (Hunter), owned by Tom stalwart supporters Bun Patrick and her late husl Robin. The pair complet three Badmintons, finis 19th in 2023.

Tom says: "He was another example of a tri and a horse that should do it, but he was brillian have photos of him hunt in Ireland as a three-yea and it made him brave, l he was unbelievably spo

"In the showjumping at his last Badminton, there was a double of wat trays and I remember thinking, 'You jumped the Vicarage Vee yesterday, bu you actually could stop here,' so I basic galloped him flat out at it.

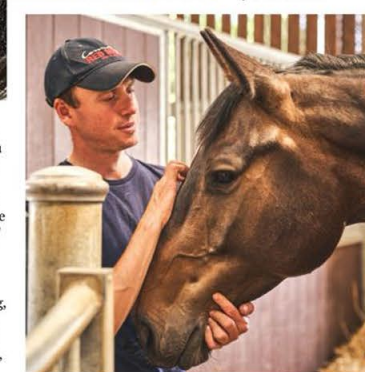
"He made me believe I could do it. When Dreamliner went well at Badmi last year, I said to Bunny that having b there three times with Hunter makes : difference to feeling like you can go ba and be competitive, so I owe him a lot He's eventing with Bunny's granddaug



Tom hacks with Samantha Alberto (right), who is riding her home-bred The Mail



Left: Tom and Dreamliner post a 12th-place finish at Badminton this year. Right: yard manager Effie-Anna Christakou keeps operations at home running smoothly when Tom is away competing. Below: Calcourt Diamond came to Tom to sell, but he soon found a new owner in Serena White so he could keep the six-year-old. Bottom: Tom took on Dreamliner at advanced level, and describes him as a "professional"



Lily Maltby at novice now – they are both 18 years old."

Tom's string is headed by 15-year-old Dreamliner (Dreamer), a home-bred for owners Mark and Angela Chamberlayne. He had competed up to five-star with other riders, most recently Oliver Townend, before Tom took him on in 2023.

He explains: "I knew the Chamberlaynes' daughter Clare, who events, and there was a connection through my farrier, Phillip Martin, but I didn't know them well. I literally got a call one night in the winter. That just doesn't happen, does it? You don't get a phone call asking you to take on a more experienced horse. But Oliver had five or six five-star horses and Angela enjoys Dreamer being closer to home."

"He was pretty easy to pick up. He's had quite a few riders and Oliver had done such a good job, it was like a computer manual. In a way, I wanted to make him less robotic and let his character come out more."

"He's actually pretty cheeky – we have to be careful leading him at home as he'd love to gallop away from you. He's wild on the horse walks at events and last year I did too much work before the dressage at Badminton – then you go in and he drops behind the leg and wants to fall asleep. But he's very professional because he knows when to pull it off."

Riding at speed across country at five-star has been part of Tom's campaign to be more competitive, after the "one-paced" Hunter.

"Dreamer takes a bit of balancing and needs to be set up on his hindlegs. He's

big and not nippy, but he has an unbelievable gallop, so you haven't got any excuses," says Tom. "It's easy when you're eight or nine minutes in to go a bit protective and think, 'I've got this far, don't blow it now,' but I'm very conscious you have to keep taking risks."

"It's a cheesy quote, but I remember Chris Bartle saying, 'There's no disgrace in failing courageously.' You're better to go out there and ride forward, rather than going out half-hearted. If it doesn't come off, people will say, 'Oh, that was unlucky, you gave it a great shot.'"

BACKING up Dreamer are two horses owned by Jo Handman, who has had horses with Tom for a decade.

The 13-year-old Quintilius completed Pau last year and Tom says: "I think he's got a proper five-star result in him."

Jo also has the 10-year-old LB Mettaphor, who went well at Bramham this year until a late fall.

"I think he's a proper Badminton and Burghley horse – a proper galloper, quite an old-fashioned type, lots of blood," says Tom. "He came from Karen Dixon in Ireland, whose daughter Tara found him very strong. It's taken a long time to work that out. I alternate his bits, but actually, I think it's a strength thing – he has a huge amount of power there and it gets overloaded onto the front end."

Tom hopes to aim nine-year-old The Mail Man at the young horse CCI4*-S at Blenheim. He is a home-bred for his landlady Samantha Alberto, by Jaguar Mail and out of a mare she bought on the shopping trip to Ireland when Tom found Possible Mission.

"He missed some time last year because he struck into himself cross-country schooling, but he's a scopey, brave horse that I am confident will keep going up the levels," says Tom.

A younger Cevin Z half-brother to The Mail Man, Victoremz Mission, is among Tom's exciting six-year-olds.

"Robin Patrick died about 18 months ago so Victoremz Mission runs in his memory," says Tom of the horse owned by Robin's wife Bunny and Venetia Blakey.

The coloured four-star mare Honeybrook Extra Special is out of action after being injured this year. She belongs to Pammy Hutton, whose Talland School of Equitation is next door to Tom's yard.

"Pammy trains me on the flat, on a fairly informal basis at times, because I'm up there – I know everyone thinks Pammy is terrifying, but she is also very generous. I use their indoor arena, especially in winter, and on a Wednesday if I'm at home, I'll teach two students jump lessons. It's a really fun environment and it's great for our younger staff to have people of a similar age around. And if I have any business query, their secretary is an encyclopedia."



Tom also works with dressage rider Dan Greenwood, who also has horses for Tom's owner Jo Handman, while on the jumping side, he trains with Jay Halim and Rowland Fernyhough.

"Rowland breeds a lot, so often I have a horse of his in for sale. Calcourt Diamond came to me last year to sell and I didn't want to let him go, so I found him an owner – Serena White," he says.

Being "incredibly supportive" in the background is Tom's partner Henri Scalon, who works full-time as a planning consultant and events at novice level on the 20-year-old former five-star horse

Proud Courage. The couple live together next to the yard.

AND what is Tom's ultimate ambition?

"I would love to win a five-star," he says. "We go to Rosamund Green Farm cross-country schooling and the owner Robin Dumas said to me, 'I think you can and will win a five-star.' It sounds really arrogant, but that's given me belief."

"It's one thing to get one or two horses to five-star, but the top riders do it over and over again and I find that inspiring. If you keep putting yourself in a good enough position and doing all three phases well, eventually it can become your moment."

"To be on a team as a British rider isn't easy, so I think you have to do your own thing. And if that were to come along, then that would be amazing."

"You live off the high of a good Badminton for a long time and I want to do that for as long as I possibly can. I want to be a competitive, consistent rider – one of those names who always has a horse or two at those top events."

Tom doesn't sound arrogant – far from it – but there's a steady tenacity there. He may be a latecomer to the prize-givings at five-star, but he plans to be in plenty more of them in the future. **H&H**

NEXT WEEK Driving star Jeff Osborne on continuing to compete in his 90th year

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