

Piggy takes the spoils

POPLAR PARK

PIGGY French definitely saved the best for last when, during a busy weekend, she piloted her final two rides around the cross-country at Poplar Park to top the leaderboards in the two main sections.

Lavinia and James Wells' Boherdeel Champion made the best possible return to competition after a year off with a win in the AI courtesy of the only double clear in the class, while Walter French and Michael Underwood's ODT Raphael relished the step up to intermediate level by heading section M from start to finish.

Amy Young made the long trek to Suffolk from her yard in County Durham worthwhile by winning the OI with her mother's Highville, depriving

Piggy of a hattrick of intermediate wins in the process — she had to settle for second place with Cast Away II.

Laden with rosettes and prizes at the end of the day, Piggy said of Boherdeel Champion: "He went like a dream and it's lovely to have him back. He had most of last year off after he tweaked a leg, but he's back with a vengeance now. He's been in work for a long time because, all being well, he'll go to Badminton, so he's very fit.

"He got excited in the dressage and I was a bit disappointed with his score of 34.4 as dressage is usually one of his strengths, but he was foot perfect in the two jumping phases. He found the cross-country really easy and it didn't feel like we were going fast at all, so I'm amazed we came home inside the time."

Piggy was equally pleased with her intermediate winner, the seven-year-old ODT Raphael, whom she purchased from boyfriend Oliver Townend last year.

"Oliver bought him from Ireland at the end of 2006 and I was with him when he tried him and really liked him. Raphael is a proper eventing type with a lot of ability. I know I'm probably biased, but I would definitely buy from Oliver again — he's got a lot of really good youngsters."

Besides Piggy's second place with another of Lavinia and James Wells' horses, Cast Away II, who was runner-up in the OI, she also captured a novice section with another horse bought through Oliver, Sue Crane's Ballyraggett.

But proving that even the best take a fall on occasions, Piggy didn't enjoy a copybook round on her other Badminton prospect, Paris. The pair parted company at fence 3, the Jackson Stops & Staff Step and Palisade and Piggy said: "I was such an idiot. I decided to canter him round and I'm not sure what happened when we came around the corner to the fence. I just got it all wrong and he tried to jump the whole thing in one

go. I had the best round on him other than that. He's absolute heaven and I'm so lucky to have him."

It was a case of so near and yet so far for Oliver Townend in both the AI and the OI. He took second and third places in the AI with his two William Curtis-sired geldings, Flint Curtis and his Isleham OI winner Clover Curtis.

Encouragingly, Flint decided to behave himself in the dressage arena and posted a score of 28.9, which was bettered only by Piggy and Paris (23.3). However, one show jump down and 2.4 time penalties proved costly for Oli on this occasion.

Clover Curtis gave Oliver another good ride to complete just behind his more experienced stablemate on 35.5. The pair posted the fastest cross-country time of the day, which is hopefully a good indication that the horse's hobday operation is paying dividends.

Oliver was also beaten by 'girl power' in the form of Amy Young, Piggy and Emily Gilruth in the OI, in



above Nigel Taylor and Animator, fourth in the intermediate

which he had to settle for fourth, fifth and seventh places with Daisy Crazy, ODT Master Rose and Divine Inspiration respectively.

Fit as a fiddle

"He really flew around today," was Amy Young's reaction to Highville's winning performance in the OI. "I've just kept him ticking over through the winter by doing some show jumping and dressage competitions, but he felt great. I've never been to Poplar before, but I decided to come this year because the ground always seems to be good and I wasn't disappointed."

Emily Gilruth, another 'Poplar virgin', rounded off a good weekend by taking third place in the OI aboard Henry and Edna Harding's nine-year-old Bramham-bound Ashdale Cruise Master.

"We came here because Henry and Edna go away next week and they wanted to see the horses run before they went," explained Emily,

"I think I'll be back, though, as the courses were just right for the start of the season and the going was great."

The organisers kept the pressure on competitors to keep to time on Sunday, although daylight was disappearing for the last few riders. The ground was slightly softer than last year, but the sandy soil still provided good going for March. The majority of riders also felt that Jim Hardwick's cross-country tracks provided a good mix of questions.

Sue Polley

SNIPPETS

HAPPY BIRTHDAY POPLAR

POPLAR Park celebrated its 25th anniversary this year and in honour of the occasion organisers Trish and Jim Hardwick were presented with a cut glass decanter by BE regional director Chris Farr.