

Taunton Vale Team Chase

The Taunton Vale Team Chase, held at Pontispool Farm, Norton Fitzwarren showcased this exciting sport at its very best with horses and riders enjoying the awe-inspiring hedges alongside the BE event course's beautifully built fences.

Leading squad and former national champions Relentless took the open qualifier for this year's Goring Hotel and Material Change national finals in dramatic style.

Setting off at a thunderous gallop through the tricky water crossing and heading out over the first big hedges, the boys clearly meant business. Team chasing success is all about twisting and turning over huge hedges and Rowan Cope was riding the tightest of lines on new mount Mani.

Ben Pauling on Philip took a pull going into the pen where three team members must jump in before the first pops out, but lost momentum and fell. It was down to Will Grant and the big jumping Ferrari to go up front with Rowan and Mani, Dougie Gittins and Bono close on their tail, getting spectacular turns over the three huge hedges close to home for victory.

"I was holding Philip back but it was just too much and we came down," explained Ben, who as Nicky Henderson's assistant trainer had enjoyed a busy and successful week at Cheltenham "But we are both fine."

The team, who hail from Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire only meet up at events and fit in their favourite sport around busy careers – Rowan in his family's marquee hire business, Will as a partner in Wiltshire Land agent Fox Grant, while Dougie is a student.

Art Hotel Chasers were just three seconds behind, despite a run out for leader Sarah Myhill and Dingbat early on. Heather Moodie and the bold Kowhai took up the lead, galloping on in front of Yvonne Goss and Lissie Siedel, and kicking on over the second half of the track for a thrilling finish.

After missing the autumn season through rider injuries, Cardiff-based Point Two Top Spec Hair Raisers were keen to qualify for the final and rode a considered round, with Allen Brown and Max blazing the trail.

Larry Brown tipped off Daz into the water for one of the day's many duckings, but in driving rain, team mates Allen, Ally Brown and Paul Thomason took on the fences, posting a respectable time for a qualifying third place.

Wishful Thinkers took fourth place in their first open of the season, and also qualified for the championships. Katie Richards set a furious pace on Archie, with Simon Coady and Ellie Wass making the tightest of turns to stay on terms.

Close behind in fifth, Dr Cook's Quit the Bit are the first all-bitless team to be placed in an open team chase, and are captained by cross country coach Mark Smith who advocates safe riding using the seat aids rather than harsh biting. They set out steadily, led by Georgina McKeown, then picked up the pace, with Mark and Will Smith and Charlie Deutsch following her neatly through the pen. Their bold jumping horses gave a great display over the final big hedges and timber.

“Georgina, Will and Charlie were competing in their first open, as were the horses,” explained Mark. “All of the horses go well in bitless bridles and we’re hoping to qualify for the national championships.”

The Taunton Vale’s Corinthian subscribers always field at least one team to challenge the established stars in the open. Sadly He Who Dares did not win on this occasion, with Hedley Webb stuck at the water, Lucy Hastings just surviving massive leaps from Williton and Okehampton veterinary surgeon Hayden Webb finally unshipped at the hedge out of the park.

Captions:

Relentless turn tight to the third from home for victory at the Taunton Vale Team Chase.