

1998 - Confessions Of A Karapoti Virgin

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I thought it would be a fun day out. And I was right, for I was indeed out for the best part of a day. OK, it's not like I wasn't warned, and certainly I should have twigged when the race details announced: "We will allow riders to assist each other to overcome mechanical failure, injury, exhaustion and dehydration." But while my mountain biking experience was purely recreational, I had just completed the Speights Coast to Coast. Surely that made me invincible? But "invincible," as described by the Oxford English Dictionary, offers no reference to riding the "Karapoti Classic".

While I didn't consider myself a mountain bike racer, as an endurance junkie from way back I was aware of Karapoti and the intrepid Kennett Brothers who created it. As a sports journalist I had even written and photographed it.

I knew of the event's history, how the Kennetts had imported the mountain biking culture from North America and wanting to go one better had scoured the country's hilliest city in search of the toughest course. I knew of the huge popularity of the race, the 1000 rider limit and the waiting lists of riders who would happily ride a farm gate if it enabled them to return to their respective corners of the country to say they had completed Karapoti.

I knew too of the stature of the event, the international riders it attracts, the race records, and having run in the area I even knew a little of the course. However, standing on the start line on a bright sunny March morning I was about to learn that what I did know had in no way prepared me for what I didn't!

It starts Le Mans-style, with a mad scramble complete with bikes slung over shoulders across the Akatarawa River. As a multisporter such scrambles were nothing

new, but with 49.8km yet to ride the oxygen debt that followed as we raced up Karapoti Gorge at close to 40km/hr was. With the first 8km through flat but narrow tracks, it seemed everyone that was no one wanted my position.

It was ludicrous; despite several hours yet to ride we're all sprinting, heart rate monitors bleeping and legs overloading with lactate, for space before the first climb. So ludicrous in fact that you had to laugh, because with several hours yet to ride if you didn't laugh you'd cry.

Just as I decided that perhaps mountain biking wasn't for me, we came to the day's first obstacle. As the hoards in front of me zipped through a tricky water run-off, I was considering how I was going to scrape myself off the creek bed after I hurtled over the handlebars. But no sooner had I thrust that thought into the nether regions of my mind and it's the rider in front of me who is hurtling over his handlebars and I, with a rush of adrenaline and wicked cackle, am in and out of the ditch wondering what all the fuss was about. Little did I know.

Karapoti's famous LeMans style start - circa 1998



If the earlier sprint for position had eliminated any visions of glory, then the first climb killed off any remaining enthusiasm. With a clunker borrowed from the next-door neighbour and the Coast to Coast still in my legs I was in no mood for the 3km of climbing to the top of the 500m high Deadwood Ridge. But just as my legs did indeed turn to "dead wood", I discovered that I could run as fast up it as everybody around was riding. Unfortunately, the exact opposite was the situation when the terrain headed downhill.

Coming into Karapoti my mountain biking experience was purely recreational riding on gravel roads. So needless to say, the Rock Garden was an eye-opener. On a bone-jarring descent, dropping off boulders the size of my bike, I find myself hurtling over the handlebars into the surrounding bush. "Welcome to the Rock Garden," laughed the wit behind as he bounced by.

If the Rock Garden was a bit of a bastard, then the climb that followed was pure hell. It's no coincidence that this hill is dubbed "Devil's Staircase." Delighting in their understatement, the Kennetts call this a "bike-carry" section. In reality, though, it's 2km of carrying, slipping, dragging, throwing, dropping, slopping - and occasionally riding - through ankle biting bogs up Karapoti's steepest section. It's hard to call it fun, but then neither is the dentist and yet we go every year.

The fun, however, was to come. Devil's Staircase leads to the top of the 600m high Titi, which is Karapoti's highest point but also the beginning of a well-placed reward for all the work thus far. The views out over the Kapiti Coast are reward enough, but there's also "Big Ring Boulevard," which is quite simply eight kilometres of big smiles as you hurtle down well-groomed tracks. And with the only "big ring" in my case being the fact that mine was hanging out, I was happy for the rest.

Downhills, however, have their own demands and half way down the novelty was wearing as thin as my brake pads. Impending glycogen depletion meant that reactions weren't what they had been. So with wrists aching from panic stricken braking, control was soon down to a minimum and the odd visit to the underbrush more frequent. By the time we hit Dopers Creek, the final 5km climb was almost welcome. Almost!

The cramp started about 5min into the climb. A change of riding style helped... for 30secs. But with a friend having described Dopers as "a bit of a hill to finish," I was determined to ride its entirety. So it was then, that I mistook the first corner for the top. And then the second, and third, fourth, fifth, etc, etc, until eventually I decided that this really was becoming a bad joke.

Wrong again! The bad joke turned out to be the fool in front of me, who losing momentum on the granny ring grind, simply ground to a halt. The result was straight out of a box of dominos, with three of us following him down and me getting up with a somewhat symmetrical chain ring mark adorning my arse!

Back on the bike and the cramp has really arrived. But so too, mercifully, did the top. A quick stretch and a drink and I'm flying down the final descent without a care in the world because somewhere at the bottom is Karapoti Gorge, which after one final splash across the Akatarawa River leads to the finish line.

The Maori word, "Akatarawa," translates as "trailing vines." That's all very nice, but had I noticed said trailing vines I may well have hung myself from one. In 20-odd years of multisport I have never been so glad to see a finish line.

A finish line, however, has a peculiar effect on people. In the tradition of love/hate relationships everywhere, misery becomes mystery, scars become medals and bad memories turn into heroic prose. Thus, no sooner is the misery over and we're pondering how much faster we can go next year... And such is the attraction of the Karapoti Classic, there is always a next year!

The author's Karapoti experience kick-started a love affair with mountain biking that now sees him organising the same race.

