

Training 4 A Karapoti PB

In 1988, Simon Kennett was the first rider to break the Karapoti Classic 3-hour barrier. His personal best time is 2hrs 31min, set in 1991. In 2006, at age 38, he placed 8th with a time of 2hrs 35min.

How do I ride a personal best time at Karapoti?

This is a question that I have been pondering for over ten years now. Because this course never changes (much) it is a good gauge of an individual's mountain bike racing prowess. You can feel great about a personal best time around Karapoti even if your placing slips a few notches. But just what does it take to beat your personal best time?

Some of the factors involved are out of our control. Recent track maintenance can have an impact of a minute or two - sometimes more - sometimes less. Usually the effect is as psychological as physical. The weather can be significant - to the tune of five or six minutes on the winners time if it really buckets down. Praying doesn't seem to help. The speed and skill of other riders around you often makes a small difference - if a wally cuts you off it can make a big difference. You do have some control over this though - practise riding in bunches and get into a group of similar ability.

Genetics will have already decided what your absolute best time could be, but few of us will get close to this potential limit. Age is also out of our control. Riders in their early twenties often have excellent strength, high pain thresholds and fantastic skills, but most endurance athletes don't peak until their early thirties. The four fastest riders in the 1997 Karapoti could all have entered Vet class, and both Ned Overend and Kathy Lynch got faster in their late thirties. In terms of personal best times, all of these factors pale into insignificance when compared to those under your control.

Fitness

This is the biggie. Nothing else is as important as primo all round fitness.

First you have to be healthy - free of injuries, disease, parasites, addictions, nutrient deficiencies, excess stress, etc, etc. If you're not sure, get a check up. You've got to be eating good food, resting and stretching plenty, and sleeping well.

Then start thinking about a bit of bike riding. Either get a coach to write you up a training programme or head down to the library, read some stuff on training and work your own out. If you're modelling your programme on a roadies or triathletes, remember that it takes longer to recover from mountain bike rides and that mountain bike races involve some very intense intervals.

First I concentrate on building up some strength. A bit of gym work (squats and leg extensions, etc) is OK for a

start, but some specific strength training on the bike is what is really needed. Grunting away from traffic lights in the big ring and riding up the roller coaster (a series of very steep 200m long slopes separated by some flat track) in the middle ring does the trick for me. Remember to warm up and down, and stretch heaps, and spin for a few minutes between each hard effort.

Then you're going to need plenty of endurance. Your longest rides should be about 25% longer than your expected time round Karapoti, but at a fairly easy pace. A big South Island touring trip round Christmas works wonders. If you want to see how effective this is, go to a gym and get your VO2 max measured before and after.

Now it's time to stretch those lungs and increase the strength of muscle number one - the heart. A lot of your time round Karapoti will be spent grinding away at one of the three huge climbs on the verge of oxygen debt. You've got to raise the point at which you start running out of breath (your anaerobic threshold) and get comfortable sitting at this level. Time trials are the key here, especially steep long hill climb time trials.

Then, so you don't get dropped between the first and second river crossings, you're going to need some speed. Two things work nicely here - unfortunately they both involve suffering. First, some intervals. These are best done with a buddy - someone as fast as you, who you don't mind seeing suffer and who knows CPR. Find a nice steady 10 minute-long climb and race your mate up for 5-6 minutes. Instead of vomiting at the top, turn around, cruise back down and do it again six times! This is a killer but it does work. Also, do a few really short flat intervals, just in case you end up in an ugly sprint situation (useful for passing as well). Second, do a couple of races during the month before the event just to get used to the feel of it.

Finally, you'll want to feel a little bit frisky on race day. Don't do any long rides in the week before the big event. Stick to one or two short interval workouts. Have three or four rest days and shout yourself to a massage; eat lots of pasta and chill out. On the day, have a medium-sized feed of complex carbs three hours before the start, then drink plenty of fluids and maybe a bit of fruit if you feel hungry before the start.

A couple of cardinal rules: don't do hard/intense training rides back-to-back. Always warm up and down. Drink plenty (1lt/hr) and eat plenty of carbs after rides.

I also find that with a run and swim once a week, the chance of injuries plummets. Running and swimming are also handy if you want to run up the Devil's Staircase, or you trip over in one of the river crossings.

Skills

There's no doubt that skills are important. National road champ Ric Reid had a crack at the Karapoti once and was probably the fittest rider there. He does have reasonable skills, but after flying up the Gorge he got passed by the top mountain bikers on the steep rocky climbs and descents. In terms of physical skills, technique and practise are the keys.

Technique can be learnt slowly by trial and error, or learning from others (i.e: books, friends or coaches). If you are just starting out the main things to remember are: on steep descents keep your weight way back; relax a little and absorb the rocks and ruts with your arms and legs; if the track is smooth, get into a bit of a tuck; don't brake hard on loose or slippery sections; on fast corners apply your weight to the outside pedal (which should be down); on steep loose climbs sit forward on the saddle and try to relax your upper body-spin. When you're walking look for footholds free of moss and wet clay. On the staircase your feet won't slip into the ruts if they are already in them - that is where the traction tends to be best.

Practice makes perfect. It's true. The experience that comes with time - with miles ridden, with races completed, with crashes performed - is a very valuable thing. To know at a glance just how fast you can get round a wet clay corner, or the probability of a bog being rideable or if you can sustain a particular pace to the top of a climb - this knowledge can make the difference between a personal best time and a d.n.f. As Eddy Merckx said "ride lots", and preferably on tracks similar to the Karapoti.

If you can ride the course before race day that's cool, but remember but watch for 4WD or trail bikes. The Westpac rescue helicopter gets a lot of business from bikers in the Akatarawas. Also practice fixing punctures - my personal best time came despite a flatty.

Psychology

Mental skills are probably more important than physical ones, but are still largely just a matter of experience.

The most important of these skills is pacing. A good race is ridden pretty much like a time-trial - for most of the race you should try to ignore most of the other racers and ride at a steady pace. It is rumoured that when Jon Hume set the Karapoti Classic record he used a heart rate monitor and stayed within a few beats of his anaerobic threshold nearly the whole race. However, it is worth trying to draft other riders on flattish, smooth sections of track (especially the gorge) and if you are new to the Karapoti loop it may be worth pacing yourself against a more experienced rider. The biggest mistake pacing-wise is for riders to go out too hard and hit the wall on the last climb. Take it easy on the first climb and try cruising for a bit of recovery between the Devils Staircase and the Dopers climb - it is a killer if you're running on empty. Remember to drink something every quarter of an hour or so.

In the greater global scheme of things, you need to stay motivated from the beginning of your training

programme till you cross the finish line. This requires pacing on a monthly scale. Enthusiasm is limited, just like physical energy. Make sure your build up includes plenty of enjoyable rides. After a hellish interval session, warm down on some sweet single track. If you start to loose the plot, skip the workouts you don't enjoy or reward them with a massage. Maybe watch some cycling videos ('Breaking Away' is a classic) or have a complete break from bike stuff for a couple of days (the rest will probably do you good physically too).

Before the race memorise the course - check out the map and the altitude graph if you haven't ridden it before. Try to keep away from excessive hype (a walkman is handy here). Visualise yourself riding the whole thing in style - you are composed on the climbs and grace personified on the descents. You stride swiftly, unstoppably through the river crossings and are totally elated at the finish. This will help reduce the amount of nervous energy you burn up before the start.

During the race concentrate on riding over the tops of climbs; ignore what's beyond the edge of the track (unless someone's crashed, of course); keep your goal in mind with a sense of urgency.

Equipment

Despite all the hype, the equipment playing field is pretty level these days. You could spend \$10 000 upgrading from your average XT equipped, race rig and not gain a single minute. Titanium chainrings and aluminium spoke nipples are for tossers. Your body is the area where really effective weight savings can be made. But people do sometimes loose big time due to serious gear choice mistakes. Mistakes like wearing sneakers for example.

To get a really good time you must have sturdy MTB shoes (with plenty of tread or studs); your entire set-up has to be durable; good clipless pedals are probably worth 30-60 seconds; decent front shocks are good for a minute or two; a camelbak might save you a crash and will reduce the chance of dehydration; a good set of tyres at the right tyre pressure (for me 45 psi) is worth at least a couple of minutes; a range of gears that you can ride the steeper hills with is vital (say a 24 tooth chainwheel with a 30 tooth rear sprocket); and finally, decent brakes with durable (or at least new) brake pads are a must from a safety point of view. Rear suspension may make the whole experience more fun, but it probably wont save you any time unless you're hooked on it (if so you'll need a lock-out shock).

Most important is good gear set-up and a familiarity with the gear you will use on race day. Your bike should fit like a glove and run like a Swiss watch. If you're unsure of your set-up, get it checked out by your local hot shop or check out a credible mountain bike book. Also ask your bike shop to give your bike a thorough once-over before the race, not at the last minute though. Get it checked out a week before hand in case they have to order any parts and so you can check they set it up the way you like it.

Set yourself a realistic goal - sort out a realistic plan for achieving that goal - then go for it!

Good luck !