

2010 - Surprises Topple 25th

The 25th anniversary of the Southern Hemisphere's longest standing mountain bike race threw up surprise winners as Taupo's Tim Wilding and Rotorua's Annika Smail dominated the Merida Karapoti Classic.

The name of Tim Wilding didn't feature once during pre-race build up for this year's Merida Karapoti Classic. The Taupo mountain bike and Xterra specialist has been thereabouts on the national scene for several years, even winning a couple of national titles, but a string of punctures and crashes have ruined any chance of success in New Zealand's premier mountain bike event, to the point where even Wilding himself was surprised to find himself alone at the front of the race after only 15k.

When the race got underway with Karapoti's famed LeMan's style start across the Akatarawa River, all eyes were on defending champion Mark Leishman (Rotorua), 2008 winner Stu Houltham (Wellington) and current New Zealand number two Brendon Sharratt (Christchurch). No one reacted when Tim Wilding went straight to the front. "I felt pretty good right from the start, so I decided to push it and see if anyone wanted to come along," said Wilding after the race.

No one did. Or not for long anyway. Houltham and Sharratt stayed close during the first 15k through Karapoti Gorge and up Deadwood Ridge, the first of Karapoti's famed climbs. But on the second half of the 500m high Deadwood Wilding went solo. This wasn't unexpected; Wilding is a former national hill climb champion. But with his record of disappointing Karapoti showings Houltham wasn't unduly worried so early in the race. Sharratt, meanwhile, was focusing on Houltham, whose record on the gruelling course included a win and three other podium placings.

Tim Wilding



This was a sound tactic because Houltham did indeed start closing on the surprise leader as they approached the infamous Rock Garden, a 3k long downhill over soccer-ball-sized rocks and waist high drop-off's. But no sooner said and Houltham experienced a string of punctures.

This left Sharratt stranded in no-man's land. Well ahead of anyone else but not close enough to launch an attack on an inspired Tim Wilding, who led over the gruelling 600m high Devil's Staircase bike carry section with close to two minutes in hand. That opened up to three minutes as he started the last long climb of the day up the Pram Track to the top of Doper's Hill, but even Wilding himself still wasn't convinced that this could be his day.

"When I was still leading over the Staircase I started thinking this might be the day," said Wilding later. "But up Dopers I was really hurting. I was right on the limit and really worried someone might be coming up behind me."

Wilding was right to worry for while Sharratt wasn't making any inroads into the lead, behind him defending champion Mark Leishman and 15 year old Christchurch phenomenon Anton Cooper were catching both of them. However, 25 years of Karapoti history shows that the leader over the top of Doper's Hill is usually the winner and Tim Wilding knew it.

"I almost couldn't believe it when I was still in the lead at the top of Dopers he said. "It's mostly downhill and flat after that to the finish and I was pretty sure I could hold on."

And hold on he did, stopping the clock after 2hrs 21min 29secs. This year's 25th anniversary also doubled as the New Zealand mountain bike marathon championship, which means Wilding will wear the national marathon champion jersey internationally this year. "I can't believe it really," said Wilding on the finish line, a big grin breaking out behind a face covered in Karapoti mud after a face plant coming down the last hill.

"I've never had much luck in this race and even when I was still leading I was expecting guys like Stu and Cabin

(Mark Leishman) to come through on the final climb."

Leishman did indeed come through, but it was too little too late. Behind Wilding, Sharratt held on by the skin of his teeth to claim second in 2hrs 24min 10secs, just nine seconds ahead of the defending champion. In fourth place Anton Cooper claimed the junior title just 11secs ahead of Stu Houltham, who shrugged off punctures to ride back to fifth place.

The women's race at this year's 25th anniversary Merida Karapoti Classic followed much the same pattern as the men. The pre-race hype surrounded Rotorua's Nic Leary, who after just two years in the sport claimed her first national title a week prior to Karapoti. Locals hoped 19 year old Samara Sheppard might shine, and the three time Karapoti junior winner claimed a solid third place. But it was another Rotorua rider, Annika Smail, who shone brightest.

It was Leary who led out, but not my choice. She actually thought Smail was ahead of her and spent the first 10k on the limit chasing no one: "I didn't get a great start and assumed Annika was ahead of me," shrugged Leary later. "I chased really hard for a long time, then when she came past I just didn't have the legs."

When Smail did take the lead the pair stayed close up Deadwood. But then bike problems saw Leary drop away before Devil's Staircase. The lead gave even more life to Smail's legs and she romped away to win by eight minutes. "It was good to finally have a good ride at Karapoti," laughed Smail, who stopped the clock at 2hrs 52min 13secs.

Annika Smail



Despite New Zealand's summer than never happened, Karapoti produced a surprisingly fast course this year. Overnight rain followed by brief showers on the start line couldn't even dampen the enthusiasm. Wilding's win made him the fifth fastest Karapoti champion of all time, ahead of legends of the sport like John Hume. Smail's win made her the fourth fastest female all-time, ahead of riders such as former world number two Susan De Mattei (USA) and Commonwealth Games silver medallist Susy Pryde.

In the age group racing, however there were some staggering performances. In the men's 50 to 59 years Wellington's Ian Paintin knocked a minute of a record that many thought would never be beaten, clocking 2hrs 45min 05secs. The men's and women's 60-plus category also produced new records. Akatarawa resident Dale Lopez slashed a massive 18 minutes of the men's record with 3hrs 20min 34secs, but it was his female counterpart that produced arguably the greatest Karapoti performance ever.

Until last year, the women's 60-plus category had no names or records attached to it at all until Wellington's Sue Cuthbertson became the first. This

year there were three women over 60, but winner Liz Eskrick stole the show with a staggering race record of 3hrs 45min 31secs. The Nelsonian's ride was good enough to be the fourth over 60 of any gender and the 15th fastest female overall.

Also putting his hand up to be among Karapoti's most impressive records was Rotorua's Garth Weinberg, who dominated the single speed category for the eighth time in nine years, breaking his own record yet again with a superb 2hrs 36min 41secs.

Further back in the field, the 25th anniversary Merida Karapoti Classic also celebrated record performances of another kind. Upper Hutt's Alistair Rhodes finished his 23rd Karapoti to maintain his grip on the most Karapoti's completed.

Several times over the years the Upper Hutt doctor has been the eldest finisher, but last year Tokoroa rider Alden Etheridge became the first rider over 70 to complete Karapoti. This year the 73 year old maintained his status as the eldest finisher, but among women there was a shift in power with Hamilton's 63 year old Issy Kennedy claiming the title of Karapoti's eldest female finisher.

This year's 25th anniversary Merida Karapoti Classic was staged amid a mountain bike festival week in Wellington that opened with the national championship and closed with Karapoti. But actually it closed with a little low-key race the day after when 17 riders raced the original 1986 Karapoti course.

This 38k route from the top of the Akatarawa Saddle down through private land and then on to the second half of the current Karapoti course hadn't been raced since that first year. Ironically, more riders (49) rode what was then only New Zealand's third official mountain bike race. But times 25 years later were a tad slicker; in 1986 Tim Galloway won by two seconds over Simon Kennett in 2hrs 35min 28secs. This year winner Alex Revell illustrated how much mountain biking has progressed with a time of 1hr 55min 03secs to take line honours ahead of regular top 20 Karapoti finisher Rob Kilvington.

After a quarter century of the race he created, it was fitting that Paul Kennett was on hand to start the Karapoti Original. Brother's Simon and Jonathan were in on the act too, Simon claiming fifth in 2hrs 09min 44secs, while Jonathan rode Tail End Charlie, just as had done 25 years previous.

The line up for Karapoti's 1986 re-enactment

