

Karapoti & Me

Marg Leyland - 2014

Just over a year ago I finished the Karapoti Classic for the first time. I had set myself a goal of finishing in under 4 hours, so was stoked to cross the line after 3 hours and 49 minutes of pain. I was pretty pleased with myself, but remember being inspired by Kim Hurst's speech after she won the race in 2:50:27. Cogs started whirring in my head, and instead of thinking that the girls at the pointy end of the race were a totally different breed to me, I began to think that if another Pom in her thirties with a full time job could achieve so much, then what was stopping me?

I facebook-stalked Kim, found out who her coach was, and got in touch with Lisa Morgan aka Cowbell Coaching. With a structured training programme, my times improved dramatically and I started to set myself some more ambitious goals. We initially talked about a sub-3:30 Karapoti for 2014, which then changed to a sub 3:15, and then to breaking Kim's age group record of 3:10. By K-day, I was only going to be satisfied if I could pass the "bragging benchmark" and join the Sub-3hr Club.

The races I did leading up to Karapoti had been a bit average, with lots of mechanical problems and general lack of awesomeness. Things started to look up at mid-February when I bonded with my new bike. After a BG fit at iRide and finally sorting out my optimal tyre pressures, suddenly I felt like I was riding it instead of being taken for a ride.

I have to admit to being a little bit nervous leading up to Karapoti. I thought my goals might be unrealistic and Lisa is so Karapoti-focussed that it seemed crucial to do well. I took February off work between jobs, and had planned to do heaps of training. It turned out that organising my life in a month was quite ambitious and fitting training in was just as much of a challenge as usual. However, little by little everything seemed to fall into place and by K-day the nerves were gone and I felt calm and ready.

Steve Pedley, owner of Crank It Cycles, had told me with great pride about how he arrives at Karapoti at 8:30 on race day with his waders to check out the best route across the river at the start. I watched Steve lead the expert men through the river and copied his route!

After nailing the river crossing I was wondering where Kim had got to, and sure enough it wasn't long before she came around the corner and overtook me. She told me to get on her wheel and drafted me along the road. I kept up with Kim until the stream crossing on the gorge when I realised I had forgotten to take the gel I was supposed to eat on the start line. I made the mistake of trying to eat it just as we arrived at the first stream crossing, and stuffed up the exit from the stream and also dropped the gel. Lesson learnt - don't panic, and last I saw of Kim until the finish.

Katie O'Neill passed me towards the end of the gorge but I had resolved not to worry about what anyone else was doing, just to stick to my own pace and concentrate on getting in under 3 hours. Familiarity with the course helped me on the climbs, knowing the peak elevations meant that I wasn't fooled by the

numerous false summits and knew I just had to keep grinding. My resolution to stay in the big chain ring for any hill that wasn't important enough to have a name didn't last long!

Looking way too happy on Devil's Staircase

I was pleased to hear that Kim was 9 minutes ahead of me at the top of Devil's Staircase, which meant she was on track to beat the record. Coming down Big Ring Boulevard, Ricky Pincott's technique for cornering on gravel worked a treat, so unlike 2013 I didn't need to spend the afternoon soaking my gravel rash in the river.

The climb up Doper's was a breeze compared to last year, when I was crippled with cramp. I just kept grinding up there, knowing it was the final push; and then the sprint to the end desperately hoping that I would make it in on the right side of three hours. I knew it was close, and the Garmin was still reading 2:59 when I crossed the line, and I was SO HAPPY!!!!

Official time 2:59:41 - nineteen seconds to spare.

One of the things I realised that afternoon was how many friends I have made through mountain biking. Between finishing and prize-giving I wandered around on a Karapoti-high exchanging stories and talking smack with awesome people that I have come to know from all over New Zealand.

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