

## Records All Round at Karapoti

As the Southern Hemisphere's longest-running mountain bike event, Wellington's Karapoti Classic has always been recognised as New Zealand's premier mountain bike race. Since 1986, the savage 50k around the Akatarawa Ranges has been our mountain biking benchmark. But the 22nd Scott Karapoti Classic outdid even itself.

Commonwealth Games reps Clinton Avery and Jennifer Smith lined up as favourites for the 22nd Scott Karapoti Classic. But with strong fields lined up against both riders, no one expected them to dominate quite like they did.

Avery simply rode a collection of New Zealand, American and Australian reps into the ground. The strapping 190cm, 90kg Rotorua rider rode from the front until eventually his only competition was the clock.

Clinton Avery



Actually, it was the clock that Avery had been racing all along. A year ago he and Australian rep Peter Hatton had battled for the entire distance only for Avery to lose out on both a win and the record in the final 200m of the race. In a spectacular finish both riders crashed on the final river crossing, with Hatton scrambling to his feet faster to win by 14secs in 2hrs 18min 01secs, a time that eclipsed the previous race record held by world ranked rider Kashi Leuchs. But this year Avery was not to be denied.

With course split times taped to his handlebar stem, Avery just "rode as hard as I could". That proved to be

harder than anyone else could handle as he eventually crossed the line a massive 10min ahead of Australian Nic Both in an amazing new record of exactly 2hrs 14min.

The still only 19 year old was almost lost for words when asked to explain the amazing new record: "Is that really the time," he asked officials. "I wasn't sure if it was right."

"The track didn't seem any faster than last year," he shrugged almost apologetically. "I was feeling good and was going better on the climbs than last year, so I just went for it. But I didn't expect to go that fast."

But he did go that fast. With Wellington having had only minimal rain in the eight weeks prior, conditions for Karapoti 2007 were perhaps the fastest ever. Personal best times were posted left right and centre, with a record 102 riders adding their names to Karapoti's prestigious 'Sub-3 Hour Club'.

Behind Avery his competition were left stunned. Australian Nic Both improved three placings and six minutes over his Karapoti debut last year, but was still 10min behind Avery when he claimed second place. "He was just in another class today, we couldn't get near him," said the Australian after holding out American Rob Schnell.

Schnell had been billed as the dangerous dark-horse in this year's pre-race build up. The Colorado native is USA's sixth ranked rider and had been training in New Zealand for several weeks in the build up to Karapoti. But he had never faced a race quite like the savage 50k route around Upper Hutt's Akatarawa Ranges.

"That was amazing," he said after claiming third place, just 40secs behind Nic Both. "I've never raced anything like it. The terrain, with all those huge hills and rocks and bogs and bike carrying... it was more like an adventure than a race. I loved it, but I wasn't ready for a race like that."

Scnell's fellow Colorado rider, Jennifer Smith, wasn't quite expecting what happened at Karapoti either. She had raced here before, finishing second to Commonwealth Games medallist Susy

Pryde four years previously. This year the Kiwi-born runner-turned mountain biker out-classed New Zealand's best women to claim her first Karapoti title by almost four minutes. But even Smith herself was surprised by how fast she did it.

The West Coast native smashed the 13-year-old woman's record set by endurance sport legend Kathy Lynch by more than two minutes, stopping the clock in an incredible 2hrs 47min 35secs. "Really," Smith exclaimed upon hearing her time. "That's amazing. I knew I was winning, but I had no idea how fast I was riding."

Jenni Smith



Unlike Avery, Smith had closer company. She didn't break away until the first major climb up Deadwood Ridge, and her fast pace dragged several women to fast times. Prior to 2007 only seven women had ever broken Karapoti's magical three-hour mark, but this year four new women entered the club as current New Zealand number one Fiona MacDermid (2:51.15), local Olympian Robyn Wong (2:55.40) and Taumarunui firefighter Katrine Lawton (2:59.51) all broke three hours.

The fast times continued, with eight new age group records. Locals ruled

the day, with Fiona Howatt shaving 32secs off the women's 30-39 record with 3hrs 25min 17secs, and Trevor Woodward slashing 11min off the men's 40-49 record with an impressive 2hrs 32min 25secs that was the 10<sup>th</sup> fastest time of the day. Woodward, who has finished as high as second at Karapoti, also maintained his position at the head of the Sub-3 Hour Club with his 14<sup>th</sup> finish under the mark.

Clinton Avery's younger brother Patrick was also flying and combined with his race-winning older bro they tumbled the famous Kennett Brothers for the family team title. Others to tumble included Rotorua Single Speed doyen Garth Weinberg, who despite breaking his own single speed course record by two minutes lost out to Auckland's Michael May who posted 2hrs 40min 54secs to claim 25<sup>th</sup> place overall despite the single gear handicap.

Uni-cycle doyen Ken Looi continued to dominate the one-wheelers at Karapoti. The Wellington doctor may well have broken his own one-wheel record too, but lost time stopping to aid a stricken rider during the race.

At opposite ends of the spectrum 18 year old Carl Jones and 63-year-old

Noel Pollard proved immune to age barriers. Pollard, from Palmerston North, won the men's 60-plus race for the third year in a row, breaking his own record for the third time as well with 3hrs 40min 18secs. Jones, from Whakatane, clipped 47secs off the junior race record with 2hrs 32min 04secs to place ninth fastest overall.

Also defying age was Sydney's Hans Dielacher. The 51 year old was one of more than 50 Aussies who made the trip across for Karapoti, and he ripped around the course in 2hrs 46min 48secs to be 42<sup>nd</sup> fastest overall and break the 50-59 record by eight minutes.

Defying time was Upper Hutt's own Alister Rhodes, who 22 year's ago was the oldest competitor in the inaugural Karapoti Classic. Ironically the 65 year old was not the eldest this year, that award went the way of Porirua's 67-year-old Doug Stevens. But Rhodes did complete his 20<sup>th</sup> Karapoti to continue his reign as the rider with the most Karapoti finishes.

In contrast to Rhodes, 16-year-old Samara Sheppard completed her first Karapoti, but the way she did it was one of the most impressive

performances of the day. The Wellington runner-turned mountain biker ripped 15min from the junior women's record previously held by Commonwealth Games rep Myra Moller. Confirming the growing opinion that she could be New Zealand's next world-class rider, Sheppard clocked a class 3hrs 04min 13secs to be the fifth fastest female overall. As a gauge to how impressive that ride was, in recent years two former world junior champions have won Karapoti in very similar times.

Indeed, it was record all round at Karapoti in 2007. A record 1300 riders from 13 countries started the 22<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Southern Hemisphere's longest-running mountain bike event. This year organisers increased the entry limit to cope with an ever-increasing demand that saw almost 1700 riders from 13 countries apply for the popular event.

The twenty third Scott Karapoti Classic is scheduled for March 1, 2008. For more details see [www.karapoti.co.nz](http://www.karapoti.co.nz).

