

# The Race of Champions

Defending champions, Him Hurst and Ed Crossling were among the first to confirm their return for New Zealand's premier mountain bike race, the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic. But with a handful of former champions and place getters lining up alongside them this Saturday, the 2018 champions won't have it all their own way

In 2018 Hurst won her fourth title ahead of 2017 winner, Sam Sheppard, a Wellingtonian now based in Australia. Both are returning but will need to watch for world mountain running champion-turned Olympic triathlete-turned national representative cyclist-turned mountain biker, Kate McIlroy. McIlroy recently won the South Island's Pioneer stage race and what she lacks in mountain bike experience she is expected to make up on Karapoti's long, steep climbs.

Established in 1986, the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic has been the epicentre of New Zealand mountain biking for more than three decades. Thought to be the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere, it was the first in New Zealand to attract 100 riders, the first to attract 1000 riders, and the first to attract international riders.

The attraction is an old-school 50k traverse of the scenic but savage Akatarawa Ranges. Parts of the route hark back to pre-European days when Maori use the Akatarawa Ranges as a route between the Wairarapa and the Kapiti Coast. Some trails were established by the first European loggers. Amid almost 2000m of vertical gain, iconic Karapoti landmarks include the Rock Garden and Devils Staircase.

One rider who keeps coming back is Wanganui rider, Brendon Sharratt, who has finished second and third at Karapoti and therefore may be the hungriest of the elite men's field. Defending champion Ed Crossling had a similar run of minor placings before his win in 2018. But they'll both need to watch for 2017 champion Kyle Ward from Australia.

Defending champions aren't the only people who return every year. First-timers can create just as much notice. Such as nine-year-old Wellingtonian, Kuba Solc, who hopes to be the youngest ever finisher.

The Bluebridge Karapoti Classic is New Zealand mountain biking's must-do, rite-of-passage type ride. Wellington's Marco Renal and Francis Hoen are both riding their 29th consecutive Karapoti, while Auckland's 77-year-old John Winkie is hoping to be the eldest ever finisher.

Champions from yester-year are frequent starters too. Way back in 1990, English mountain bike legend Paul Hinton became Karapoti's first international winner. He returns this year hoping to win his 50 to 59 year age group.

There is more to Karapoti, however, than the legendary 50k Classic. The 20k Challenge is an easier introduction to the Karapoti experience and the Kids 5k Klassic adds a family feel. Karapoti Classic creator Paul Kennett won his own race in 1987 and is riding this year with his son, Adam. Paul brother, Simon, won the 1988 race is riding the 20k this year with daughter, Miro, on a tandem.

Race day for the 34th Bluebridge Karapoti Classic is Saturday 2nd March. Info and results will be at [www.karapoti.co.nz/history](http://www.karapoti.co.nz/history) .