

Mud & Glory

Karapoti is always the feature event of New Zealand's mountain bike calendar, but the women's race in 2009 was billed as a true "classic": the race record holder, Jenny Hopkinson-Smith, and the defending champion, Fiona Macdermid, against rising stars Nic Leary and Samara Sheppard, and Aussie standout Jo Bennett. But the course conditions and one woman's class combined to make it a one-way race.

Macdermid Best Ever?

A year ago Palmerston North's Fiona Macdermid missed the women's course record and \$1000 bonus that goes with it by just six seconds. Hopkinson, a US-based Kiwi who has represented New Zealand at world champs and Commonwealth Games, clocked 2hrs 47min 39secs in 2007, the year where awesome conditions and close racing saw records among both men and women. So Macdermid was keen for another crack, but despite the stellar competition this year's wet course wasn't looking likely to produce fast times. That would be true for almost everyone in the race this year, except Macdermid.

In the end only Macdermid rode true to form. Hopkinson-Smith and Sheppard both slipped from contention with punctures, and while Leary and Bennett raced solidly to second and third place, Macdermid was in another class.

In conditions that saw most riders finish 10 to 15min slower than normal, Macdermid produced arguably the best female performance in Karapoti history to rip around the course in 2hrs 47min 54secs. While the clock once again stopped tantalisingly close to the record, the winner took some consolation in the fact that on a drier track a sub-2:40 might be possible.

Fiona Macdermid



Leishman's Luck - Finally

Mark Leishman wasn't the favourite for the 2009 Karapoti Classic. Hell, until the Tuesday before the race he wasn't even going to ride. But gentle coaxing by the race organisers saw Leishman make the best last-minute decision of his career.

For the second year in a row all eyes were on fellow Palmerston North rider Stuart Houltham. Last year Houltham won the national title and Karapoti in the same week and he looked likely to repeat the feat after winning the national

title again this year. And there was also Australia's Merida Flight Centre pro team with Nick Both and Tim Bennett - both previous Karapoti placegetters - and mountain bike orienteering world champion Adrian Jackson. But no one mentioned Mark Leishman.

The Palmerston North mountain bike and Xterra specialist is a Karapoti regular, but has suffered something of a love/hate relationship whereby the race he's wanted to win most has not been at all kind. In recent years he'd finished fifth, seventh and twice sixth, all solid results marred by punctures or mechanical issues. So you could say he'd earned his due. But even Leishman himself wasn't expecting what followed.

It was Aussie Adrian Jackson who sparked the race up from the start. An early split after Karapoti's LeMans-like start across the Akatarawa River saw Jackson, Houltham and Nelson youngster George Bennett leading a small group as they approached the first of Karapoti's three cruel climbs.

Leishman, in fact, only joined them after red-lining himself for 10k after missing the split. "When I caught them I went straight to the front and tried to slow the pace down so I could recover before the first climb," he grinned.

It didn't take long for the group to reject Leishman's tactics and as they started up the 500m high Deadwood Ridge it was Jackson who emerged again at the front. The three-time mountain bike orienteering world champion is a specialist in long adventure style races such as Karapoti and revelled in the wet, muddy conditions. By the time he rocketed down the fabled Rock Garden and clambered up the feared Devil's Staircase he had split the front group and opened up several minutes over Nelson's Bennett.

It was on Devil's Staircase that Mark Leishman also started to emerge. "I think my triathlon fitness really helped," he would later say. "I was nowhere early on but on all those slippery climbs I got off and could run faster than the others were riding."

On Devil's Staircase Leishman clambering back to fourth, then after a hair-raising downhill he worked his way into second place on the 5k long Dopers Hill by running the steepest, slipperiest pitches while others tried to ride. But while he was making good progress, his race really came together 10min ahead of him.

Australia's Adrian Jackson was flying down Karapoti Gorge with a 10min lead and only 5k to ride when he felt his tyre go flat. He put in a new tube and was still leading when it blew again. But this time he was out of spares and could only watch and swear as a pleasantly surprised Leishman raced past for the win.

"I can't believe it, it's like a fairytale," said the surprised winner as he stood on the finish line in disbelief.

Leishman hadn't really had Karapoti on his radar for 2009 and only entered a week out at the organisers good-natured insistence. The bike he rode, a 27-pound 29'er, was even borrowed and still being fitted the night before the race.

Cabin Leishman all smiles



“You can’t help feel for the Aussie guy,” he said. “But that’s Karapoti and I’ve had my share of bad luck here in the past.”

A despondent Adrian Jackson eventually trundled in on his punctured wheel in an unlucky 13th place, 16min behind Leishman’s winning time of 2hrs 28min 39secs; a performance that in better conditions might have seen him make Karapoti’s elite sub-2:20 club. Seventy-two seconds behind him, Stuart Houltham claimed second place to go with his

first last year and a third in 2002. Aussie Nick Both also started his own Karapoti collection, adding third place to his second in 2007.

Top Towns & Ground Breakers

For the second year in a row Palmerston North laid claim to Karapoti’s top town crown. While Fiona Macdermid was racing to one of the best female performances ever, her 11-year-old daughter, Kara, was winning the junior women’s within the 20k Penny Farthing Cycles Challenge. The younger Macdermid finished only 13min behind a close race for line honours between Upper Hutt teenage standouts Matt Grundy and Chris Strain, which provoked the comment from a proud mum, “I think I’ll have to start looking over my shoulder before long.”

Palmerston North riders continued to stand out, with Jackson and Rose Green defending their tandem title. Other highlights included Rotorua’s Mary-Anne Avery taking out her ninth Karapoti age group title, this time in the 50 to 59 year old women, while fellow Roto-Vegas rider Garth Weinberg continued his single speed reign with a sixth title in seven years.

Further back in the pack, 72 year old Alan Etheridge and 61-year-old Sue Cuthbertson were crowd pleasers when they became the first 70-year old male and 60 year old female to finish Karapoti. At the other end of the scale nine-year-old Eden Cruise became the youngest ever to complete the gruelling 50k course, and beat more than half the field in the process.

In 2010 Karapoti celebrates its 25th anniversary, which by default means mountain biking in New Zealand also turns 25. In celebration of this fact Wellington is hoping to host a New Zealand Mountain Bike Week, with the 25th Merida Karapoti Classic as the feature finale on March 6. Entries will be open from May at www.karapoti.co.nz.

Nine year old Eden Cruise became Karapoti’s youngest ever 50k finisher

