

2011 - The Toughest But Easiest Ever

Most years the few weeks following Karapoti are a bit of a blur for us. The weeks before any big race involve long hours, then race day is a huge high, followed typically by a huge low as the adrenaline crashes and lack of sleep catches up. But this year has been different. There have been bigger Karapoti's; there have been faster Karapoti's. But I doubt there have been many Karapoti's that were tougher, or that went smoother, or that left the organisers so pumped for the next year.

For some reason everything gelled better than ever this year and rather than wanting to sleep for a month we're already chaffing at the bit for 2012. As much as we'd love to take all the credit, mostly it's due to the huge team of almost 100 people who make this race tick.

Roles vary from our course crew of Leon Zwetsloot and John Cussins, to Upper Hutt Community Rescue and Rimutaka Lions, to volunteers who vary from mountain bikers taking a break from the race to a close network of friends and family who come from far and wide because they love the event.

That's not to say we didn't have our moments. Mine started back in November, when a passing car clipped my elbow and launched me into a parked car. Not that I know how, why, what or who. I woke up in hospital.

Relative to the potential of such things, I got off pretty lightly with a few cracked ribs and fingers, a wonky neck, a dark black hue down the entire side of my body and a concussion that left me dopier than normal for a few months - although as my wife wondered aloud, "It's hard to know what the benchmark was before the accident!"

Anyway, it hurt and still hurts and after a few months of rehab & 12hour sleeps I realised I needed to side step other work, not to mention my own riding, to make sure Karapoti could live up to the standards we've come to expect.

My own woes aside, this year's organisational challenge came the day before the race when the portaloos company informed us that despite our six month old order Civil Defence had hi-jacked almost every portable toilet in the country for Christchurch's earthquake stricken residents. One could hardly argue the case, but a couple of thousand people in the middle of the Akatarawa Ranges with no toilets between them does not a good time make.

But somehow the show always goes on. Problems such as these test our sanity, but the goodwill surrounding Karapoti always seems to make things happen. This time it was a friend at another hire company who drove a truck around town pinching portaloos from building sites for the weekend.

All this is just an insight into organising big events. We also got an insight into how natural disasters such as Christchurch's earthquakes and Australia's summer floods have far-reaching effects. In the weeks leading up to the race I was watching the woes of Australia and Christchurch on one screen while Karapoti withdrawals from the same places popped up on another screen. In the end just 31 Cantabs and 19 Aussies lined up in 2011 - hopefully their lives and mountain biking will be back on track soon.

Despite their problems, however, it was great to see the Cantabrians and Aussies who did turn out for Karapoti. The most impressive was 16 year old Anton Cooper shrugging off the stresses in Christchurch to become Karapoti's youngest ever winner. In the closest ever finish, he outsprinted Rotorua's Dirk Peters on the final rise up to the finish chute to win by three seconds.

While watching Anton ripping it up was a highlight, even more satisfying personally was the exhausted grins on the faces of mud-caked riders as they crossed the finish line.

I don't think I've ever seen as many mud-caked bikes and riders crossing the finish line. It seemed like every second rider talked about having no brakes left down Dopers Hill. More than a few rode with less than perfect eyesight after mud forced them to throw away contact lenses. I saw several riders finish with their chain shortened to single speed after breaking rear derailleurs.

Three generations at the helm



Indeed, many finishers were wondering if 2011's Merida Karapoti Classic was the toughest ever. Old hands will remember similarly epic years in the 1990s and while 2004 was a nice day the course was very rough and muddy after record rainfall in February. To get a true picture of how 2011 stacks up, you have to analyse past results.

This year only 32 broke Karapoti's coveted three hour barrier. Compare that to the last two years, which were also wet, but 2009 had 52 sub-three's while 2010 had 63. In fact you have to go back to 2004 and 1999 for similar years, when just 27 riders bettered three hours. Before that, back in 1996 just 18 riders were under three. If you factor in today's bikes being significantly better, then 2011 probably cancels out 2004 and 1999. So probably it's between 1996 and 2011 for the title of the "toughest Karapoti ever".

One person who didn't let the conditions slow her down was Elina Ussher. The former Finnish cross country ski rep and 2010 Speight's Coast to Coast champion showed she's as good as anyone in any discipline by leading the pro-elite womens race from start to finish to win by more than five minutes.

So the 26th Merida Karapoti Classic is now but a memory; albeit an epic one. Planning is already underway for the 2012 Merida Karapoti Classic, which as well as the traditional Saturday race will involve a surprise for Sunday... think Perverse Reverse.

Pencil it in now... the 2012 Merida Karapoti Classic - March 3 and 4... Entries open May 1, 2011. See you there!