

1996 - Karapoti Hell Race

This is the story of my first Karapoti. Please add it to the stories on your website. Mark Rickerby, 9 Oct 1996.

Sunday dawned grey and wet. After a quick warm up ride down to the service station to pump up my tires, I headed out to Upper Hutt still praying for the weather to clear up. Waiting on the start line, I caught a brief glimpse of sun through a hole in the cloud and my hopes rose. Five minutes later, it was raining again. I had a long wait, as my class, Sport Junior men, was one of the last to start.

An icy splash through the river signalled the beginning of my first Karapoti and I was racing up the gorge, spraying mud and water. Just past the clearing, I switched down into my granny gear for the first short climb and heard a horrible scraping sound as my chain tied itself in a knot. I ran to the top, jumped off and quickly untangled it and then headed along the flat. The next hill climb forced me to change down, and again, my chain tangled up. It was impossible for me to get the chain into the small chain ring and I was faced with the prospect of riding the rest of the race with no granny gear.

I made my way up the long Deadwood ridge track, mostly running. On the short sections that I could ride I had noticed my handlebar grips coming loose. At the bottom of the short downhill to the stream half way up, the grips slipped right off. I put them in my pocket, also pocketing my glasses, which had fogged up so much that I couldn't see out of them.

At the top of Deadwood, I realised that being unable to ride uphill meant I would have to make up time on the downhills. I hammered down to the Rock Garden turn-off and started bumping down through the slippery rocks. I passed dozens of people but near the bottom, I was forced to get off because there were too many people walking for me to get past. I still managed to run past a few people, crossed the stream and headed towards the Devils Staircase. Riding along the muddy track to the start of the climb, my front wheel slipped on rock and I plunged into a cold puddle, much to the amusement of the riders behind me.

The Devils Staircase climb was a constant battle for traction in the sticky clay steps. I grabbed a Powerade at the drink station when I reached the top and hammered off along the ridge track, eager to make up some time. I nearly crashed around the first corner of Big Ring Boulevard when I suddenly discovered that I had no brakes left. I made my way more cautiously, but when the metal of the pads started to grind into the rim, I knew I had to stop, although I had to crash into a toi-toi bush to achieve this.

I spent a long time at the side of the track trying to adjust my brakes while dozens of more fortunate riders whizzed past me. It was impossible though, as the brakes were covered in mud which rendered them

unadjustable with my freezing cold hands. I ended up running most of the way to Dopers.

I made one desperate final attempt to switch my chain into the small ring but by this stage, there was so much mud in my cables that my gears wouldn't even shift. It was impossible to ride up, and I was forced to run the whole of the Pram Track, up and down. At the hairpin, I mistakenly assumed that from here it was flat to the river, hopped on my bike and started cranking. I rounded a corner and dropped into another fast downhill section.

With no brakes, I knew that I was going to crash. I slid around the next corner, and ploughed into a mound of dirt before hitting a pine tree and careering back across the track. Crashing into a heap, I ripped my shin on the chain ring. Then, when I got to my feet I heard the hissing sound of a puncture.

With frozen fingers, I slowly fixed the puncture, crossed the river and headed back down the Gorge, soaking wet and freezing cold. I eventually finished in a time of 5 hours 17 minutes, which given that I had recce'd the course in under four hours, was a tad annoying. The post-race wash up cost me over \$200 in replacement parts: new brake pads, a new 22 tooth chain ring, a new chain, new shift cables and new grips.

It was truly a hell race, but I'll be back next year!

Was this you Mark ?

