

1996 - Dem Karapoti Bones

Paul Kennett has a greater affinity than most with the Karapoti Classic; he created the race and with brothers Simon and Jonathon established it as New Zealand premier mountain bike event. But as Paul himself explains, no one is immune to the Karapoti curse.

Back in December of 1995 my brother Simon and I went out to check on the Karapoti Classic course. Since before I first rode it in 1985, Devil's Staircase has always had huge bogs. Our plan was to take an old ice axe and cut drainage channels so that the bogs might drain and dry out.

As it turned out the March '96 race day was pretty wet so most of our work was not very evident. But we did some real fine bog clearing on two thirds of The Staircase before we managed (well, Simon managed actually) to break the ice axe on a tenacious tree root. That put an end to the work, so with nothing more to do we cranked it up down Big Ring Boulevard, the downhill from Titi, on the way home.

In hindsight I would say we rode with a certain degree of recklessness... We b-l-a-z-e-d... Then we punctured - of course. We fixed that, and then blazed some more. Then we punctured - of course. Having used up our entire store of repair patches we then rode pretty damn carefully. Not carefully enough though - because once again I punctured.

This happens so often in the Karapoti Classic it has become pretty standard practice to carry a box of patches plus two spare tubes. At this point, desperate to get riding again, we tried all the oddball techniques we'd ever read:

Option 1: Fill the tyre with grass. This didn't work very well. It's really hard to stuff enough grass in a tyre to create a cushion to ride on.

Option 2: Tie a knot in the tube around the puncture and hope that it is an airtight knot. It was not an airtight knot!

Option 3: Use a stick to twist around the puncture and hopefully create an airtight twist. Works as well as Option 2.

Option 4: Suddenly remember that Ground Effect shorts come with a spare patch sewn into the lining - Argghhh, so it's not just a marketing gimmick!

So, back on the bikes and riding cautiously towards Dopers Creek, but as we rounded a right hand corner Simon yelled "motorbike". I saw the motorbike, he saw me, our eyes locked, we both slammed on brakes. His front wheel twitched left then right. To late... Wham! I slammed into his shoulder.

An instant later I was laying comfortably on the side of the track, but sensed I'd hurt myself in some strange new way.

"Are you alright?" the motorbiker asked.
"I think my leg is broken," I said in a far-too casual manner.
"Are you sure?" he said, probably because there was no outward sign of damage and I was acting pretty damn calm.
"No, I'll check," I replied while lifting my knee to find a new hinge half way down my shin.
"Yep, it's broken."

At this point I was aware that I was very calm. Too calm! Establishing that the motorbiker was fine, he rode on to ring for help. In the meantime Simon checked my bike - it was OK. I lay back, ate some peanuts and drank some juice. The weather was fine and sunny; Simon took a photo and chatted in a slightly cheerful way.

About 45 minutes later we heard the Westpac helicopter. They landed at Dopers Creek and ran to me. After a shot of Morphine they removed my shoe and complimented me on my lack of external injuries and pumped up a blow-up splint around the leg. I was in a dull "I'll-be-all-right-as-long-as-you-don't-move-me" sort of pain, but couldn't help noticing again how calm I was.

The flight to Wellington Hospital lasted about 10 minutes. The medics spent this time trying to get a reading from the heart rate monitor. As we landed it finally managed to say 75 beats per minute. I was strapped to a stretcher and got a fine view of the inside roof for the whole trip. Not a great sight-seeing flight, but landing on the hospital roof we were met by a team of medics in true "ER" fashion, which was pretty cool.

Inside, I was wheeled through miles of corridor to the fracture clinic. They sent me to x-ray who got a nice shot of my broken tibia and fibula that I looked pretty cool too - lots of sympathy. Back in fracture clinic they decided to slap me in a toe to upper thigh cast. This suited me just fine because I was worried they might want to stick some pins in my leg, which of course would have involved cutting me open and all that yucky needle stuff. My sister arrived shortly thereafter, and the nurse said I could stay the night or go home. So I went home. All up it took about four hours from breaking the leg to sitting on my sister's couch drinking a warm cup of Milo.

A month later, in January, they replaced the full cast with a toe to knee cast. It's pretty gross what happens to a thigh muscle when it's not being used. There was still mud from the bog clearing back in December! In March they replaced that cast with an 'ankle to knee' cast, which came off in late April.

Now, in May, five months after the accident I'm riding ok, but have lost a lot of climbing power. I limp a bit when walking because my ankle hasn't regained full strength yet. My knee hurts in cold weather too. The doctors reckon I should avoid playing rugby for the next few months, but I've never played in my life so no great loss there. He thought cycling would be good for it... hee hee. I'm sure he's right... Yee haa!

Paul Kennett

