

NZ's Original Mountain Bike Race !

In mountain bike circles the first weekend in March means one thing - the Karapoti Classic! Every year mountain bikers from all ends of New Zealand and the world clamour for one of a thousand slots in what is New Zealand's longest running mountain bike event.

Thirty-five years ago, mountain biking was a new fringe sport, referred to then as "off road" cycling. There were only a couple of brands of mountain bike available and races were nothing more than a gathering of a few mates. Until one day late in the summer of 1986, when 45 hardy souls headed into Wellington's Akatarawa Ranges.

None of those 45 starters really thought of themselves as "mountain bikers" and organiser, Paul Kennett, certainly had no idea of the history he had just created. But from humble beginnings Karapoti became the event that popularised mountain biking in New Zealand and today it is the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere.

The Kennett Bro's

Created and nurtured by Paul Kennett and his two brothers Simon and Jonathan, the Karapoti concept revolved around an uncompromising 50km of 4WD trails, gnarly single track, wheel sucking sludge, raging river crossings, wall to wall wilderness and huge hills that have you grinding a granny ring up but grinning like a goon on the way down.

The Kennett's had been involved in mountain biking at ground level in New Zealand since the early '80s, when American Joe Breeze turned up bike touring in NZ on a fat-tyred bike. Breeze was one of the sport's originator in the late 1970s in California and is credited with being the first person to build dedicated "mountain bikes". The Kennett's, all keen cycle tourists, took to the sport and went about creating a cutting-edge challenge.

The original Karapoti started at the top of the Akatarawa Ranges and met the current course at the top of the Rock Garden. It seemed like a major expedition with many competitors sporting bush shirts and backpacks and riding modified road bikes. Simon Kennett, who finished second, rode a 10-speed touring bike and recalls eventual race winner Tim Galloway offering him an apple out of his backpack as they started up the final climb.

In 1987 they shifted the start to the Kapiti Coast, where this time it joined the current course after Devils Staircase. That year Paul Kennett won the race that he organised, but still wasn't satisfied. He had almost been beaten by a rider on a road bike and local bike shop owner Peter Burke even finished the race on a BMX. Kennett wanted a course that only a fat-tyre, multi-gear bike would survive. A course that would be seen as the definition of mountain biking. In 1988 he found it!



The Kennett Bros.



1986's Inaugural Start.

An Icon Is Born

After 1987's race Paul and brother Jonathan headed into the Akatarawa's to find a loop course that could start and finish with the spectacular Karapoti Gorge, which back then was accessed over a swing bridge beside Karapoti Park.

They headed off in opposite directions, hoping they might meet in the middle to connect the dots. It worked and the 50k route they found was so rugged and scenic and so different from any riding they had done to date that it was nothing short of classical. And thus was named the "Karapoti Classic".

"Karapoti" is a Maori term meaning "to be surrounded". And the Karapoti Classic surrounds participants in every sense of the word. Surrounded by mountainous pine forests and native bush, the course is as savage as it is scenic. And with numerous river crossings the route is also surrounded by water. As the race grew, riders too became surrounded by each other, with up to 1000 participants from as many as 16 countries all trying to meet the same challenge.

Today iconic aspects such as "The Rock Garden", "Devil's Staircase" and "Big Ring Boulevard" are spoken with nervous anticipation and misty, sometimes bloody, memories and completing Karapoti has become the benchmark. American magazine *Velonews* named it among the best 25 mountain bike races in the world and *Australian Mountain Biker* magazine called it, "the best organised mountain bike race we've seen."

Between them, the Kennett's have ridden every Karapoti Classic. Paul and Simon have won the race, with Simon being the first to break the magical three-hour mark in 1988. Indeed, the Karapoti podium has been a who's-who of the sport.

Tauranga's Jon Hume was the first Kiwi legend of the sport, winning Karapoti and national titles four years in a row during the '90s. Olympian Kashi Leuchs won Karapoti twice when he was ranked in the world top 10 and world 24hr champions Tim Vincent and Kim Hurst won three and four times respectively, with Hurst - a Welsh native who moved to Upper Hutt - becoming the first local rider to win. Commonwealth medallists, Susy Pryde and Rosara Joseph have also been Karapoti winners, as have former world junior champions like Anton Cooper, Natalie Schrietter and Lisa Mathison.



Paul Hinton was our first international winner.

Schnietter (Switz) and Mathison (Aust) are two of only a handful of internationals to have tasted Karapoti victory. Course knowledge plays such a huge part of this race that international riders have claimed top honours on only nine occasions in 35 years. The first was Great Britain's Paul Hinton in 1990, followed by women's world champion Susan DeMattei (USA) in 1993 and world top 10 Kim Eriksson (Swe) in 1998. Hinton returned to Karapoti in 2019 as a 50-year-old.

The all-time greatest, however, have been Kiwis. Kathy Lynch was among the world's top-10 and New Zealand's first Olympic mountain biker when she won eight times between 1989 and 1997 and her fastest of 2hrs 49min 42secs in 1994 was the women's record for 13 years.

The fastest today is Australian-based Wellingtonian, Samara Sheppard, who 10 years after winning the junior title returned to set a whole new standard in 2019, breaking the record by 13min with a time of 2hrs 29min 13secs that saw her finish an incredible sixth place overall.

On the same day Sheppard's husband, Australian Kyle Ward, came close to being Karapoti's fastest ever. But that tag belongs to Canterbury's Anton Cooper. In 2011 the 16-year-old became Karapoti's youngest ever winner and then followed up with two world junior titles. Then in 2014 he returned to Karapoti as the world under-23 champion to smash the Karapoti race record by seven minutes with 2hrs 07min 57secs, and then followed that up with Commonwealth Games gold medal. In 2020 he returned on a wet track for his third win.



Samara Sheppard rewrote the women's record.

More Than Just A Race

Karapoti, however, is more than just a race. The rock-stars whip around the 50k in about two and a half hours, but the average is closer to four, with some taking six or seven. In 2009 we saw the first female finisher over 60 and man over 70. A nine-year old boy and 10-year-old girl are the youngest.

While Karapoti might be the benchmark for mountain biking, the benchmark at Karapoti is the three-hour mark. In 35 years more than 25,000 people have ridden Karapoti, but only 713 men and 20 women have finished faster than three hours. The most celebrated are local legends Trevor Woodward and Jason McCarty, with Jason dethroning Trevor just last year with 23 finishes under three hours.

There's something for everyone at Karapoti too. Alongside the full 50km Classic, the 20k Challenge and a 5k kids race were introduced to get more people involved in the sport. And the post-race scene with hundreds of people lounging under the late-summer sun watching others meet their goals is a great way to cap it all off.

The history is another reason people return. Karapoti is the only race where you can compare yourself with just about every other Kiwi mountain biker ever. The website history page lists every year's results and race reports and all sorts of records. Even the shock floods of 2012 didn't upset Karapoti's unbroken streak and the race was postponed two weeks.

It's this culture and the race day atmosphere that keeps people coming back year after year. The Karapoti Life Members club has 27 members, 19 of whom have finished the race 20 times or more. As of 2020's 35th anniversary event, the most ever finishes is a tie between lifers, Francis Hoen (Wgtn) and Mark "Marco" Renall (LH), with 30 each.

During all this history, mountain biking had been riding into a new era. It began in 1996, when the sport first appeared at the Olympics. That created a made-for-TV format that divorced top-level racing from the more adventurous riding upon which the sport was founded. The time since has seen the sport fracture further into various genres such as enduro, pump tracks, gravel riding, stage racing and brevets, while event sponsorship took a blow with the advent of the made-for-TV spectator-based festivals such as Crankworx.

It's not good or bad. It's just how it is. These things are cyclical too. Marathon running had a boom in the 80s and 2000s. Triathlon and Multisport boomed in the 90s and again after Kiwi Olympic success in 2004. Trail running is enjoying a boom right now. So mountain biking's traditional adventure format will have its time again.

Likewise, the Karapoti Classic will always have a place in the sport as an epic old-school adventure ride paying tribute to how it all began. It's the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere and the only race that every Kiwi mountain biker knows. And when you line up, you become part of that history!



Karapoti's "classic" start.