



SUPERB WEATHER, record entries and race records galore were a suitable celebration for the 21st Birthday of New Zealand's longest running mountain bike event.

Established in 1986, the Karapoti Classic is the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. Based in Wellington's rugged Akatarawa Ranges near Upper Hutt, this annual gathering has become the cultural hub New Zealand mountain biking. American cycling magazine, *Velo News*, once ranked Karapoti among the top 25 mountain bike races in the world and every year the event attracts more international entrants than any other mountain bike race in New Zealand. This year organisers received more than 1500 applications from 11 countries for Karapoti's traditional 1000-rider limit.

And yet, despite Karapoti's international reputation until recently not many international riders had triumphed on the tough 50k course, which is what made this year's record-breaking performance by Australia's Peter Hatton so special. Hatton won Karapoti two years ago, when compatriot Lisa Mathison also won the women's race. But prior to 2004 the only internationals to win New Zealand's most prestigious mountain bike event were England's Paul Hinton (1990), USA's world number two Susan DeMattai (1993), and Switzerland's Kim Eriksson (1999).

The consensus has been that Karapoti is such a tough, rugged and remote race that to win it involves some measure of course experience. Hidden deep within the Akatarawa Ranges this classic challenge revolves around three huge hills, each climbing to almost 600m above sea level. Each climb is split by a series of defining elements, such as the "Rock Garden" – a 2km descent of soccer ball-sized boulders and drops offs the size of your bike; or the "Devils Staircase" – a 2km long climb that starts with knee deep bogs leading to a series of huge steps cut into a slippery clay track; or "Big Ring Boulevard" – a super-fast 8km of non-stop downhill.

In 2003 Australian legend Rob Eva did a course recce by motorbike the day before the race, but still couldn't win. Indeed, Kim Eriksson's win in 1999 had more to do with Kashi Leuch's puncturing when leading just 5k from the finish. But in 2004 Australian Under-23 champion Peter Hatton and world junior champion Lisa Mathison came across the ditch and did the double sight-unseen. This started a landslide of international interest that peaked this year.

In 2006 Karapoti's 21st birthday was dominated by internationals, with five overseas riders among the top 15 men and an unprecedented seven among the top 10 women. At the front Australia's Peter Hatton returned with some course knowledge to not only beat riders from USA, Canada, England, Scotland, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, Switzerland, South Africa and Germany, but on the way he smashed Kashi Leuch's eight year old course record.

It was a young New Zealander, however, who pushed the 22-year-old Australian the hardest as Hatton and Rotorua teenage sensation Clinton Avery raced neck and neck until the final few hundred metres of the gruelling 50k race. Hatton, still only 23 himself, lined up as second seed behind three time Karapoti winner and 2005 champion Tim Vincent from Nelson. But it was Avery, a three-time junior winner at Karapoti, who lit the race up from the gun.

"Clinton and Aaron Tuckerman just went for it from the start," Hatton would say later. "I was a few places back and had to really work hard to bridge up to them."

Hatton caught the early leaders mid-way through Karapoti Gorge, 5k into the race. But in doing so he dragged defending champion Tim Vincent with him. "Peter and I managed to bridge up to them," said Vincent, but I was right on the rivet."

As it turned out Vincent saw his entire race slip away courtesy of an incredible five punctures that would see him trundle home almost an hour off the pace. "I got the first one just after we caught them," he would later say. "Last year I managed to win with a puncture, so I wasn't too worried. I fixed it and was working my way back up when I got another one. After that it all sort of fell apart."

Up front, however, the battle between Hatton and Avery was just beginning. The pair got away from Tuckerman on Karapoti's "Warm-Up Climb". Hatton got a small break on the steep, 10min long climb, but Avery brought him back on the steep, slippery downhill into Cederholm Creek.

"Clinton's a pretty big boy," said Hatton of the 1.9m Rotorua rider. "He was going better on the flats but on the first climb I got away a wee bit. So on the next climb I really worked hard to get away. And I did, but he just kept coming back at me."

And that's how the race played out. Avery pulling back the Australian after the warm up climb, then the Australian opening up a minute on the following 20min climb to the top of Deadwood Ridge. But along the ridge top Avery came back again. They hit the Rock Garden within sight of each other, but on the long bike carry up Devil's Staircase Hatton opened up two minutes.

"When I won Karapoti two years ago I had been doing a bit of running and it really helped me get a winning break on the Staircase," he said. "This year I did a bit more running and I went up the Staircase really well. I thought I'd dropped Clinton for good at the top."

But he hadn't. Avery, still only 18, has been riding this race since he was 14. His mother and younger sister have also won their grades and his course knowledge made a huge difference on the 8k descent down Big Ring

Boulevard. He caught a surprised Hatton just before they started the final climb up the aptly named "Pram Track" to Doper's Hill, and Hatton said later, "I knew it was now or never."

Hatton rode the 20min long climb up the Pram Track like it was the last 20min of the race. "I've never been so glad to see the top of a hill," he would say later. "I was so close to blowing; another minute and I would have cracked."

At the top Hatton had more than a minute on Avery and with just a 10min descent and then 6k of flat riding to go, the race once again appeared to be over. But once again it wasn't. For the fourth time that day Clinton Avery redlined the downhill – "I was close to losing it a couple of times" – and then used his power on the flats to close down Hatton's lead.

The pair came together again in the final few kilometres and it was Karapoti's trademark river crossings that made the difference. With just 300m to ride they flew into the final river with such determination that they both wiped out. It was an incredible scene, water spraying in all directions and both men flying over their bikes and almost fully submerging.

Both were up quickly, but the cold Akatarawa River gripped Avery's calf muscle with a viscous cramp and he fell again, slicing open his knee. The Australian didn't need any encouragement. Seizing the moment he sprinted out of the river and literally dived on his bike and hammered the final 300m to hit the finish shute 15secs clear of Avery.

In the aftermath both men stood leaning on their bikes in the finish area, blood streaming from Avery's knee, and both with hardly enough energy to shake hands. Then almost like an afterthought Hatton said, "What time did we do."

What they did was smash the 1998 course record set by Kiwi Olympian Kashi Leuchs. Hatton had stopped the clock in an amazing 2hrs 18min 01sec to take almost 3min from Leuch's old mark. As Avery limped off to the first aid area assisted by the race doctor, he was grinning and shaking his head at the same time: he had broken one of the best records in the sport, but couldn't win the race.

Such was their battle that Hatton and Avery left third placed Aaron Tuckerman (Blenheim) 8min adrift in third, with Upper Hutt's Wayne Hiscock another 2min back in fourth. "The track this year was really fast but really it was Clinton who set things up with a fast pace from the start," explained Hatton of his record-breaking win.

The Sydney-sider now heads to the USA to race professionally on the road, while Avery's arrival on the pro-scene this year was rewarded with a place in the national team for the Commonwealth Games and Rotorua's world mountain biking championship in August.

The women's title in the 21st birthday Karapoti Classic was more clear-cut. Switzerland's Nathalie Schneitter overcame a bad start to take the lead after 6k and rode away to a huge winning margin despite not realising she was actually in the lead.

The 2004 world junior champion started as number two seed behind 2004 Karapoti winner and 2002 and 2003 world junior champion Lisa Mathison. But the Swiss rider caught a bad start and was frantically chasing in the early going through Karapoti Gorge.

"I rode most of the race trying as hard as I could to catch up," Schneitter later laughed. "At the aid station on the big hill (Devil's Staircase) I almost crashed when a marshal said that I was the first woman. I turned my head and asked him again and almost crashed."

Schneitter had got a bad start, but Lisa Mathison had an even worse one. The pint-sized Aussie only resumed racing in January after a year away from the sport following a strong 10th place in the 2004 Athens Olympics. Not yet back to top form she started conservatively and rode through the field. Another Australian, Imogen Smith, was the leader early on and when Schneitter passed her just before the Warm-Up Climb she didn't realise she was now the leader.

"When she passed me she asked who I was," said an incredulous Smith. "When she realised I wasn't Lisa she just charged off."

While Schneitter was chasing a non-existent leader, behind her a close group of women slowly blew each other up in chase of Schneitter. Smith, New Zealand rep Myra Moller and Aussie reps Rhonda Pearce, Kim Kelleher, Katrin Van der Spiegel and Claire Garcia-Webb all chased hard up the early climbs. "I could see her for quite a long way," said Smith but just couldn't get up to her."

Eventually the powerfully built Swiss rider had opened up enough of a lead to have time to fix a puncture. If not for that inconvenience she would have become only the eighth woman to break Karapoti's prestigious three-hour barrier. She eventually stopped the clock in 3hrs 04min 37secs, with Mathison coming through late in the race to claim second place ahead of compatriots Smith, Pearce and local Wellington rider Myra Moller.

"It was a strange race," said the 20 year old Schneitter. "I tried so hard to catch up but I was leading all the time."

Both winners, Hatton and Schneitter, had favourable comments of Karapoti's gruelling 50k affair.

"Most races these days are lots of laps," said Hatton. "But Karapoti is like an adventure."

"It is a beautiful race," said Schneitter. "It is my first professional win, so it will be a good memory."

Apparently more than 1500 others agreed, because this year's Karapoti Classic once

again exceeded the traditional 1000 rider cut-off. Organisers eventually allowed 1130 riders to start. This is a huge departure from the inaugural race in 1986, which had just 45 starters.

A highlight in the 21st birthday event was yet another notch in the downtube for Upper Hutt's own Alister Rhodes. The 63-year-old Doctor is the only person to have participated in every Karapoti Classic. Wellington bike shop owner Francis Hoen notched up his 18th Karapoti and has more finishes over the full 50k Classic course even that Rhodes. No one has more sub-three hour finishes than Trevor Woodward. Several times a placegetter at Karapoti during the 1990s, the 41 year old returned this year to finish 16th in the pro race and record his 13th sub three.

Indeed, the course was so fast and weather so favourable for this year's Karapoti that all manner of age group records tumbled. Wanganui's Karen Chambers set a new mark in the Masters 1 Women (30-39yrs) with 3hrs 25min 49secs. Palmerston North's Noel Pollard set a new mark of 3hrs 41min 49secs in the Masters 4 Men (60yrs+). The team sections also saw new records, with Simon and Paul Kennett winning the Family category for the second year in a row. But for the first time the prestigious Corporate and Trade team sections both went across the Tasman to the pro team Bush Ranger Bikes.

A highlight was two superb new records from Neils Madsen and Garth Weinberg. Weinberg, from Rotorua, smashed his own single speed record, riding the 50k with just one gear in an incredible 2hrs 46min 24secs. Local rider Rob Kilvington also beat Weinberg's old record in his first serious single speed outing. Madsen, from Wellington and better known as a world age group triathlon champion and only occasional mountain bike racer, became the first Masters 3 Man (50-59yrs) to break the three-hour barrier. In a very competitive field Madsen clocked 2hrs 54min 51secs to finish ahead of fellow Wellingtonian Marco Renalli, who missed the three-hour barrier by a tantalising 59secs.

This year's Karapoti Classic capped an exciting summer for endurance sports in Wellington. Events in the region have experienced huge growth in the last year and a few weeks later Sarah Ulmer would win the women's World Cup road race in Parliament Grounds. The next big event on the Capital endurance calendar is Wellington's premier multisport event, the Kathmandu Crazyman on May 6.

In 2007 the Karapoti Classic will return to its traditional date on the first weekend of March. Race date is Saturday March 3. This year more than 1500 riders applied for the 1000-rider limit. Entries are now online at www.karapoti.co.nz. Don't miss out. •

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