

2011 - Youngest Ever Wins Toughest Ever

Heavy rain, strong winds, high rivers and lots of mud made this year's Merida Karapoti Classic the toughest ever seen in the 26 year history of the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event. But of 1100 riders from 12 countries who lined up for the 50k classic through Upper Hutt's gruelling Akatarawa Ranges, it was a tiny teenager from Christchurch who handled it better than anyone.



Anton Cooper became Karapoti's youngest winner

Christchurch teenager Anton Cooper shrugged off testing conditions and the country's best mountain bikers, not to mention his earthquake torn hometown, to become the youngest ever winner of New Zealand's premier mountain bike race.

Cooper came into the race expected to push a stacked field that included the past three winners, Tim Wilding (Wgtn), Mark Leishman (Roto) and Stu Houltham (Wgtn), the national championship runner up Dirk Peters, top Canadian Thomas Skinner and multisport world champion Richard Ussher.

Extreme conditions on the famous Rock Garden and Devil's Staircase split the race wide open and by halfway it was a four way battle between Cooper, Peters, Houltham and Wilding. But on the final climb up the 500m high Doper's Hill the young Christchurch rider went to work.

"Anton just started shredding and I was like, 'that's just ridiculous'" said Stu Houltham in disbelief after finishing a solid third place.

Only Rotorua's Dirk Peters could match Cooper's pace and the two riders were still locked together coming into the final kilometre. "I knew I had to be in front at the last river crossing," said the 16 year old. "I tried stay in front, but Dirk kept coming past. So I waited until the last minute and just sprinted at the last river crossing and up that last little hill."

In the end just three seconds separated the two riders, with Cooper stopping the clock at 2hrs 26min 32secs. Houltham followed just 35secs later in third, ahead of Wilding, while multisporter Richard Ussher impressed onlookers to claim fifth place.

For once, however, Richard Ussher wasn't the most impressive athlete in his household. He and wife Elina, also a former multisport world champion and Finnish cross

country skiing rep, were considered nothing more than dark horses.

But in the women's race the Nelson-based Finn outclassed the specialist mountain bikers to win New Zealand most important mountain bike race.

Ussher was aggressive from the gun, leading the elite women's field in Karapoti's famous LeMans start across the Akatarawa River.

"I wanted to get a good start and ride at my own pace," she said after winning in 3hrs 04min 59secs. But Ussher's "own pace" resulted in a winning margin of 10min over runner up Erin Greene (Dunedin). Although in one of the most impressive rides of the day, local amateur rider Kim Hamer-Hurst claimed second fastest female time in winning her 30-39 age group just 5min behind Ussher in 3hrs 10min 31secs.

Also impressive was third place Eloise Fry, who sacrificed a possible second place to assist fellow Nelsonian Meggie Richard, who crashed heavily in the brutal conditions before recovering to finish fourth ahead of Auckland's Sasha Smith and Australian Connie Silvestri.

Silvestri was the best performed of almost 100 international riders who struggled in what event organiser Michael Jacques called "the toughest Karapoti ever". Canadian Thomas Skinner is one his country's best mountain bikers, but could manage only 11th at Karapoti and crossed the finish line shaking his head and muttering, "That was crazy, it was unreal, I've never raced anything like it."

Others, however, revelled in the gruelling race. Sixty nine year old Upper Hutt doctor Alastair Rhodes finished his 23rd Merida Karapoti Classic, while 33 year old Napier rider Rox Price became the first woman to finish New Zealand's premier mountain bike race on a uni-cycle.

Elina Ussher

