

Experience Versus Youth at Karapoti

The Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is renowned as the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race. So it was fitting in its 38th year that the race for line honours among both men and women should turn out to be classic battles of experience versus youth.

Established in 1986, the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is thought to be the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. Certainly it is New Zealand's eldest. Based in Upper Hutt's rugged Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, the course is an old-school adventure ride featuring huge hills and river crossings amid remote, rugged and historic forest trails.

It was at the 2007 Karapoti Classic that Wellington's Samara Sheppard tasted her first major success as a mountain biker, setting a junior record that stood until 2020 when Taupo youngster Sammie Maxwell smashed that time by more than 10min. Sheppard had gone on to be a three-time winner and the fastest ever woman at Karapoti, but in 2023 it was the same young rider who broke her junior record who would push Sheppard to Karapoti's closest ever win.

In a classic race of experience versus youth, Sheppard took a leaf out of partner Kyle Ward's 2022 race book by starting conservatively and then spreading the field on the first big climb to the top of the 480m high Deadwood Ridge.

The 32-year-old opened up a good lead, only to have Maxwell come back at her by halfway at the top of Devils Staircase. Sheppard tried to stretch it out again on the final climb over Doper's Hill, but Maxwell refused to let her go.

Into the final 5k through Karapoti Gorge they were still locked together with Sheppard piling on the pressure. That paid dividends in the end, with Maxwell crashing in the final few kilometres but then chasing yet again before falling in the final river crossing to trail Sheppard at the line by just 16secs.



Samara Sheppard won the closest womens race ever.



Cam Jones dominated among men.

Behind their torrid battle, Rotorua's Sonia Foote claimed third ahead of Wellington's Laura Bridger and Lower Hutt's Jill Westenra. In many ways, the performances of Foote and Westenra were equal to the winner. The previously closest ever womens race had been in 1997, when Westenra finished second just 22secs behind eight-time women's winner Kathy Lynch. At age 58 Westenra could still claim fifth, while Sonia Foote claimed third, 18 years after having finished second.

The men's race was also billed as experience versus youth, with Australian Kyle Ward chasing a record fifth title but having to face a handful of rising young talent such as previous placegetters, Adam Francis (PNth), Cameron Jones (Nel), Connor Johnston and Olly Shaw (Roto).

The least talked about among these was Nelson's Cam Jones. A year ago, he had managed only eighth after a crash saw him riding half the race without a seat. But the year before, at only 19 years of age, Jones had finished second and two years later he was confident enough to take the race to the Australian. And in the end, the 21-year-olds only real competition was the clock.

Jones cleared out 10k into the 50k course, using the 5k long Deadwood climb to stretch the field. Less than a minute separated these top five at the top of Deadwood, but Jones continued applying pressure through to the Rock Garden downhill and the gruelling bike carry to the 600m high Devils Staircase so that by halfway only a crash or mechanical problem would deny him the win.

In the end Jones won by almost seven minutes, stopping the clock back at Karapoti park in 2hrs 16min 15secs.

“It’s pretty amazing to add my name to the list of winners in such a historic race like Karapoti,” said the clearly overjoyed Jones after winning in the seventh fastest time ever despite conditions that many considered the worst ever.

Behind him, four-time Karapoti winner Kyle Ward had a rare off day to fight back from fourth to second place ahead of Connor Johnston, who added third place to his second from 2022. Rotorua triathlete Olly Shaw filled fourth ahead of local

standout Callum Kennedy and Palmerston North’s Adam Francis in sixth.

More than 400 riders entered for this years 38th edition of the race that kick-started mountain biking Downunder.

There were other record setters too, such as Wellingtonians Francis Hoen and Marco Renall, who finished their 33rd Karapoti’s, and 78 year old Peter Schmitz who became the eldest ever finisher of the Southern Hemisphere’s longest running mountain bike race.

Full results at www.karapoti.co.nz/history.

