

Young Riders Win NZ's Oldest Mountain Bike Race

The Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is renown as the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race. So, it was fitting, in its 39th year, that the winners were among the youngest.

Three years ago, when Palmerston North nineteen-year-old Caleb Bottcher, claimed a surprise third at the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic, observers thought he looked like a future winner. In 2024, three years stronger and more experienced after touring the under-23 world circuit, he was every bit the winner of New Zealand's best known mountain bike event.

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.

Bottcher was keen to add his name to Karapoti's history and pushed the early pace at the front of a five-man group of Taupo brothers Coen and Corben Nicol, Kapiti's Matt Walker and Wellington's Callum Kennedy. Failing to establish an early break he backed off until the first big climb of the day to the 575m high Deadwood Ridge. Stretched the bunch on the 5k long climb, he then maintained pressure on the roller coaster ridgetop to establish a lead that he never relinquished.

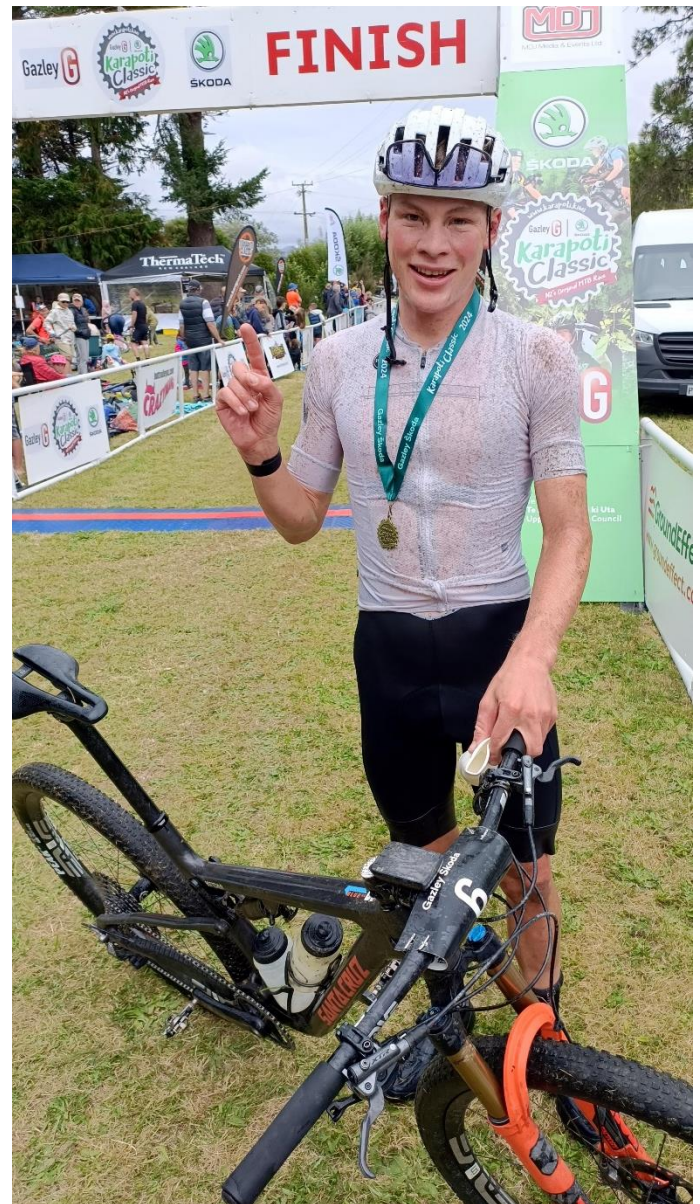
The winning margin at the finish line was just on eight minutes, with Bottcher recording 2hrs 16min 47secs. Behind him, Coen Nicol won a see-sawing tussle among the remaining four to claim second ahead of Walker, Kennedy and Corban Nicol.

There were no see-sawing battles among women. After finishing second three times, Taupo's Sammie Maxwell came to Karapoti in search not only of a win but also a crack at a women's race record that many thought was unbreakable.

Noel Pollard



Caleb Bottcher



After debuting at Karapoti in 2020 with a junior record, the now 22-year-old had ridden faster every year but still not managed a win. But after winning the under-23 world title five months ago, Maxwell has a new confidence and at Karapoti she led from Karapoti's legendary Lemans-style river crossing start all the way to a win that was among the best ever.

Leading from start to finish, Maxwell established a record-breaking winning margin of 34min to stop the clock in 2hrs 30min 49secs. Although it was not the record she was after. In recording the second fastest female Karapoti ever, she missed Samara Sheppard's 2019 race record by just 96secs. Behind that stunning solo ride, local rider Laura Bridger finally stood

on the podium in second place ahead of Sonia Foote (Rotorua), Deb Lynch (Porirua) and Anna Bristow (Hastings).

While youngsters dominated the racing up front, it was a couple of masters riders who were left to rewrite their record book. Wellingtonian, Gary Moller, smashed the record for riders over 70, clocking a time of 2hrs 59min 55secs that saw him placed 29th overall, and also made him the eldest member of Karapoti's prestigious Sub Three Hour Club. And staying with outstanding elders, Peter Schmitz (79) and Marco Renall (66)

continued their finishing streak with 35 and 34 finishes apiece. While 82-year-old Noel Pollard returned to Karapoti after heart surgery to become the eldest finisher ever at age 82.

In 2025 the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic will celebrate its 40th anniversary, which as the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event means that the sport also celebrates 40 years Downunder.

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

Sammie Maxwell

