

Young Riders Win NZ's Oldest Mountain Bike Race

Photos: Jeff Mein-Smith & Michael Jacques

The Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is renown as the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race. So, it was fitting, on its 40th anniversary event, the race should be a won by an old hand and rookie.

Established in 1986, the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is thought to be the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. 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.

Certainly some of the riders were old school. Lower Hutt's Marco Renall lined up for his 36th consecutive Karapoti, while Wellington's Peter Schmitz was the eldest at age 80 in his 35th Karapoti. Karapoti creator and 1987 winner, Paul Kennett, had the satisfaction of watching his son Adam finish third in the 20k option, while Paul's brother, Simon, also a former organiser, was riding the same bike he rode to win the race in 1988. Craig Lawn, a two-time winner in the mid-90s, rode for the first time in more than 25 years, while 1997 runner up and four-time Coast to Coast champion, Jill Westenra, took out the 60-plus title.

The winner amongst women, however, was definitely new school. Rookies aren't meant to win Karapoti's demanding route. History and statistics point towards riders needing a few years to come to grips with the steep climbs, river crossings, bogs and wide variety of terrain. But for Christchurch's Mary Gray the unknown turned into a blessing when on the first big climb up Deadwood Ridge she found herself in front and just set about staying there.



Karapoti failed to faze rookie winner Mary Gray



Retro reigned supreme at the 40th Karapoti

"I didn't really know what to expect," said Gray after her surprise win ahead of Nelson's Emma Bateup, Wellington's recent Coast to Coast winner Deb Lynch and Namibian Olympian Michelle Vorster, who had won Karapoti in 2021 before riding at the Tokyo Olympics.

"There were quite a few women quite close early on, which was nice, but everyone was sort of watching each other so I just decided to ride hard and see what happened."

What happened was that she rode away to win by almost 8min in 2hrs 59min 55secs to become only the 24th woman in forty years to break Karapoti's magical three-hour barrier.

A year ago Palmerston North's Caleb Bottcher had executed almost exactly the same sort of race as Gray this year. But unlike Gray, Bottcher had served a couple of years apprenticeship with junior and minor placings.

After some international experience, however, he turned up in 2024 with a lot more confidence and on finding himself at the front he just decided to go for it and duly took out his first Karapoti.



After two consecutive wins, Caleb Bottcher is certainly no. 1

“Last year I sort of watched everyone else for a while and then went,” said Bottcher. “But this year it felt like I was the guy everyone else was watching, so I thought, ‘oh well I better just get on with it.’”. And that’s what he did, eventually winning by more than five minutes in 2hrs 17min 03secs. Behind him, Rotorua’s Connor Johnston and Wanganui’s Glen Haden had a private battle for the remaining podium spots, with Johnston taking second by 27secs.



First and foremost, however, Karapoti has been a people’s race for riders of all age and ability. Catering for everyone from elite to also-rans to mountain biking’s off-beat fads, Karapoti celebrates all aspects of the sport. As well as the feature 50k, there’s a 20k introductory race and a 5k kids’ event. And while the pro’s race for cash, there are amateur age grades and special categories for corporates, families, tandems, even unicycles, the best fancy dress and the worst luck. This year saw something for cycling’s latest fad - Ebikes!

But it’s the history as the Southern Hemisphere’s longest running mountain bike event that keeps people coming back. “A big part of the Karapoti culture is that the feature 50k route has remained unchanged since 1988 ,” says event manager, Michael Jacques.”

“At karapoti.co.nz/history you can find the result for every rider who has ever raced. So whether you finish first, 50th or 500th, you can compare yourself to every rider in the same placing or the same age or even the same family for the last four decades!”

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



Four decades of Karapoti organisers