

Families That Play Together...

For the third time in five years, the mountain biking scene's fastest couple dominated New Zealand's premier mountain bike race.

Established in 1986, the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is 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.

This year, riders also had to cope with Covid postponements to turn out two months later than normal. That didn't deter husband and wife, Kyle Ward and Samara Sheppard. When borders opened again, the Australian-based professionals were among the first to hop a plane for a few weeks of mountain biking that included repeat wins in New Zealand's original mountain bike race.

Under ideal conditions and on a dry track, Ward, the defending men's champion, was back in search of a fourth title. If attained he would equal New Zealand's original mountain bike legend Jon Hume, who won on four consecutive years between 1991 and 1994. But as much as the Australian has been the winningest rider in recent years, claiming the top spot on 2017, 2019 and 2021, he has also experienced close losses and used that experience to guide him in his goal of matching Hume.

In a field stacked with up-and-coming young talent, the 30-year-old started conservatively and then attacked on the first major climb of the course, up Deadwood Ridge. From there the win was never in doubt and in fact the top four placing stayed unchanged through most of the 50k, with Ward winning his fourth title in 2hrs 15min 58secs.

"That one felt pretty hard," said Ward after winning by almost four minutes. In the past I had been pushed really hard in the final climb up Dopers Hill, and I wasn't sure I'd manage that this time. So I tried getting away early and seeing if I could stay away."

Behind the winner, Rotorua's Connor Johnstone claimed second in 2hrs 19min 32secs, followed by Palmerston North's Adam Francis and Wellingtonians Callum Kennedy and Connor Alison, who at just 16 years of age came from ninth place early on to claim fifth.



Kyle Ward (1) was always at the front for his fourth win.



Samara Sheppard (1001) & Mary Anne Moller (1005).

The women's race followed a similar pattern, for a different reason. Sheppard, the winner here in 2017 and 2019, is the only woman to have broken 2hrs 30min on Karapoti's gruelling 50k. Set in 2019, it's a record that many consider unbeatable. But in 2021 she did prove beatable when finishing second to visiting Namibian Olympian Michelle Vorster. So in 2022 youngsters Sammie Maxwell and Amy Emma Bateup tried to take the race to the favourite.

Maxwell is the current national champion, while Bateup is arguably New Zealand's best all-round rider across all genres. But Maxwell had prior form at Karapoti. Two years ago, at just 18 years of age, she broke Sheppard's 12-year-old junior record by 10min, and with her national title form was considered mostly likely to upset the favourite.

The two youngsters put the pressure on from the start, charging through Karapoti's famous Leman's style start across the Akatarawa River. Sheppard got caught napping and found herself 30 seconds off the pace after just 5min. But the experience of the 31-year-old shone through and she gradually gathered them in over the next 10k before attacking on the same climb up Deadwood Ridge that her husband had used to open up his lead.

From there the race was won and the Australian-based but Wellington-born Sheppard claimed her third title by nine minutes in 2hrs 44min 19secs. Behind her, Maxwell claimed second in 2hrs 53min 43secs and was followed by Bateup and Wellington's Mary Anne Moller.

Other highlights of the 37th Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic included Upper Hutt doctor, Alister Rhodes, finishing for the 30th time at age 80 and 1988 winner, Simon Kennett, riding with his daughter Miro on a tandem and 10 year old Amelia Burkhart becoming the youngest ever female to finish New Zealand's longest running mountain bike race.

In 2023 the 38th Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is scheduled for Saturday 4th March. Full results for 2022 can be found at: www.karapoti.co.nz/history