

1999 - Singing In The Rain

by Marcus Simons

It is the week before Karapoti. It starts raining on Thursday and stays that way - wet, wet, wet. I sit indoors and look out at the rain, feeling a bit anxious. But at least the bike is ready - although except for wiping off the dust and lubing the chain I haven't bothered doing too much to it since the Rotorua round of the Nationals two weekends before. My excuse was we'd shifted flat last weekend and I'd been busy - well I had!

Anyway, despite some clear patches and a strong drying northerly wind on Saturday arvo, Sunday morning dawns... WET! I arrive at Karapoti Park about 9am with my riding buddy Will, who is also doing the race. It's raining hard. The forecast says it will clear up about midday, but I'll almost be finished by then so fat lot of good that is.

Brenda Clap on her winning way

Wardrobe Tantrums

Pre-race nerves make me a little jittery. No matter how casual you are about a race you always get a bit hyped. This year I've been pretty casual in my build up to the Karapoti - I'm concentrating on the National Series this summer so this is just for fun. But now it doesn't matter - once you've got a number on and someone is timing you then it qualifies as a race.

My nerves usually start the morning of the race, soon after I wake up, when suddenly I remember that I have a race today. I get pretty jittery; the hands have a little shake and the heart rate races as if I've just downed eight cups of coffee at once. I lose my appetite and interest in any topic other than the race, which I don't like to talk about as it makes me even more nervous. So I usually just try to think of nothing.

This morning in the carpark it's all friendly jibing with everyone trying to relieve the tension a bit with our joking and fooling around. We try to make ourselves think of something else other than what's coming. It's a strange but memorable feeling - perhaps a bit like feel like troops going into battle.

Anyway - tools, food, water, wallet and keys... no problems sorting that out. But when I get to what to wear I mess around trying to decide if I'll take my raincoat. First yes, then no, then it rains a bit harder and I finally decide yes. Then I start the same game

with my thermal top, and after that my arm warmers. Talk about a wardrobe tantrum.

Still Raining

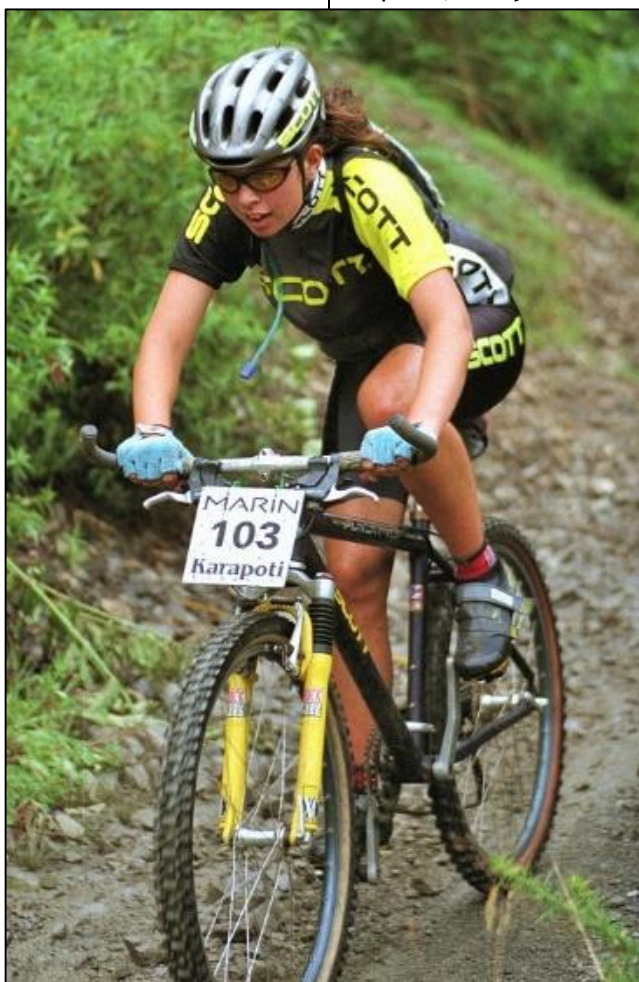
Of course what I really want to wear is my nice thick pile jacket and warm track pants, which as I look out at the rain means that what I actually want is stay in the car where it is nice and dry! But that's not really an option; everyone else is braving the rain, so in the end I don raincoat and arm warmers and leave the thermal top in a heap on the car seat.

After a quick warm up out on the road I'm lined up at the start. But with 10min still to go I have far too much time to think; eventually the arm warmers get stuffed in my Camelbak and I throw my raincoat back to Will, who is in a later start group. So now I'm ready at the start line, where along with everyone else my thoughts fluctuate between my racing heart and the fact that I'm thoroughly soaked without having even started. And then we're racing.

Big Guy

For me pretty much the moment that hooter goes off all my nerves disappear - I've got a job to do. Splashing across the cold river its up onto the short sealed road section where everyone is jostling for a place amongst the hordes, and as we head into Karapoti Gorge I getting passed about as often as I pass others.

The conditions are horrible, with greasy ascents/descents and cold rain sucking the energy out of you. There's no way I'm going to beat the previous years time in this weather, so I have already decided that the aim today is to survive without fucking the bike or body. But that said the early pace doesn't seem as hectic as last year. Maybe I'm fitter or maybe it's my relaxed attitude, but no one is trying to get past me



and I actually overtake a guy and catch the next bunch before the end of the gorge.

As we emerge from the single track I am already soaked to the bone and covered in mud. This section is a flattish and recently logged, and the northerly makes for a bit of a headwind. In front of me is a big strong looking rider, so I draft behind "Big Guy" for the next few k's to the bottom of the first hill. I save energy by drafting but end up absolutely covered in shit. But it's worth it because Big Guy is working hard and passing people while I sit behind in relative cruise mode sucking on my Camelbak.

Where's the Track Gone?

We hit the first hill. I have to walk the first steep 200 m or so because there are just too many people walking in the way. But then it's into the saddle and up the hill. Riding is way faster than walking even up this steep stuff and I start passing people - it's here I bid fair well to Big Guy who is left trudging up the hill.

The wet conditions are fogging my glasses up and I can't see too much of the track - so I just point the bike in the right direction and spin in low gear. A guy passes me about half way up the hill so I jump on his tail - maybe he can see.

We crest the summit and plunge down the other side - this is a sharp little descent, slippery at the top with loose, very steep gravel at the bottom. But luckily there's a nice groove already worn by others. It is relatively good and grippy, but it snakes from one side of the track to the other and my brakes squeal in protest all the way down. Safely down, it's into a little creek for a few hundred metres. I try riding some, but the rocks are slimy and I'm reduced to running.

Then it's up Deadwood, the first major climb. A couple of the steep sections are too wet and slippery to ride today and when I finally get to the summit I'm 10mins slower than the year before. I'm starting to feel the legs a little now so I down my first energy squeeze as I roll off down the other side.

Chasing Ridges

Into the first ridge chase section. I can never get the hang of this bit; I'm up and down the bumps and hollows almost as fast as I change up and down the gears, but still people catch me. The legs are tired after the climb and I just want to spin, but the gradient dictates I use higher gears and a bit of grunt. At least this year I have all my gears - the year before a loose screw on the front derailleur deprived me of my granny gear, which tends to be a Karapoti necessity - so this really ain't so bad.

The Rock Garden

Most people I ever speak to about the Karapoti seem to forget how nasty this ridgeline is, especially after they've been down the Rock Garden. But I guess the Rock Garden makes anything seem easy. Whatever; but I always find the last few km before the Rock Garden just nasty. It's a steep, fast downhill with loads of corners that tighten up in mid-bend. It's got slippery clay and slippery rocks, as well as rough, ruddy bits. And wherever it seems to flatten out there are

treacherously thick, soft, silty accumulations that can have you over your handlebars. But finally it's down the last twisty bit before locking the rear wheel up and sliding into the hairpin for... Drum roll please - "The Rock Garden!"

Actually, I don't find the Rock Garden too bad. The track is steeper and rougher than any other part of Karapoti, but then you tend to go a lot slower so it all cancels out. Today I ride most of the way down, except the steep, slippery section into the little creek halfway down, and one of the rockier drop offs that seems to have no good line... maybe the Rock Garden is tough.

Mud Wrestling & Bike Pushing

At the bottom of the Rock Garden it's off the bike and across the river. I down another squeeze for the mud walk up Devil's Staircase. You see different techniques here - one bigger guy is carrying his bike across his shoulders, I am pushing mine and the third guy is using a combination of pushing and carrying - it's hard to say which is easiest - we all seem to be finding the going hard. The three of us stay close together - all cursing.

My glasses steam up again and I can't see where I'm putting my feet. The guy using a combination of carrying and pushing tries riding some of the less steep sections - but it's way too slippery and his efforts just end up in more mud than is strictly good for drivetrain. I push and carry the bike - riding ain't worth it.

Half way up one guy passes us. He looks young - maybe one of the junior men - we give a bit of encouragement - "Keep going bro" - but then it's back to our own misery. Lots of slipping and sliding, and calves screaming almost as much as the lower back. Where is the bloody top!

Big Rings & Ruts

Finally, the top! Pause at the drink station, drink some water, clean the sunglasses, throw some lube on the chain... some people pass straight by the drink station, others who were there when I arrived are still there when I leave. Everyone has their own strategy I guess.

It's taken me 1hr 45mins and this is usually the half way mark in terms of time, which means something like 3.5hrs for me today. Heading off along another ridgeline I cruise for a bit trying to spin and get my legs feeling better after all the walking. The next group catch me and I pace off them along yet more ups and downs as the puddles soak me even more and my drivetrain getting grittier and grittier.

Into Big Ring Boulevard the guys I am pacing off pull away - are they mad doing that speed in these conditions? Apparently they are, because as I come round a fast sweeping corner I spot one in the underbrush to the left of the track and one getting up off the ground in the middle of the track. I find out why almost straight away; running across the corner is a deep slippery rut.

My front wheel slides into the rut even as I notice the others, and for a split second everything is happening too fast. I relax the front brake, ease on the rear brake,

put my foot down and jump off the saddle just as the back wheel drops in... then I'm racing down the rut like a rat up an aqueduct. But I've got control and as I dump speed I'm able to yank the front wheel out and fling myself back on the track, missing the guy in the middle narrowly as I yell out, "You all right mate?" I never heard the answer, but he was standing...

Singing In The Rain

After that close call I button off a bit down to Dopers Creek. A few people pass me, but it doesn't worry me - I just don't want to end up face down in the mud or having an unscheduled rest amongst the trees. Crossing the creek it's time for another squeeze and more chain lube. The grit in the drivetrain is not hampering things too much; its shifts okay and I'm not getting any chain suck, although something back there is making a terrible crunching and grinding noise. But a bit of lube fixes that completely.

Heading up the last big hill I spend most of the time in first gear and halfway up the rain goes from a drizzle to a full on down pour. But I'm feeling okay and the bike is fine, so I really am quite happy and every now and then I feel like singing - maybe something with the words "it's almost over".

A few of the steeper patches are too slippery to ride, with the rear wheel just spinning out from under me. That said I still pull away from an old guy with bad cramp and a young Asian fellow who had whizzed past me earlier. Near the top I am passing more and more people and even manage to get into 3rd gear - joy of joys!

Karapoti Cramp

Over the summit my insides knot with anxiety as we plummet down the slippery Pram Track. Again I take it easy and two people catch and pass me. My quads and calves are tired now and as the muscles are cooling in the heavy rain and cold breeze of the descent I get a twinge of cramp up my calves and inner thigh. But I reach the bottom without locking up or canning out and

let the brakes go for the final few hundred metres of downhill into yet another river crossing.

For the final furious 8km to the finish I decide to try and catch the two guys who passed me on the downhill. I pass the first guy going back into Karapoti Gorge, then down through the washout I'm stoked to nail this last tricky section and hammer out of the gorge, passing a guy with a puncture as I go. But it isn't one of the guys that passed me earlier so I keep hammering, water flying everywhere as I bunny hop as far as I can across all the big puddles. Onto the sealed road for the last 2km to the finish I see two riders 100m in front. Taking it easy until I am across the slippery wooden bridge I start cranking and pass both guys just as my inner thighs start cramping. But I know I've got them and the finish is so close I can hardly contain my glee.

Finished!

Dropping down into the last river crossing just 100m before the finish, I switch it into second gear in the hope that I'll avoid my performance of last year. This involved me falling over while suffering a cramp attack mid-stream and bashing my knee on a big rock (I still have the scar). But no such drama this year and out of the river I manage to hit the last little hill hard and get up to 7th gear. Crossing the make-shift bridge across the ditch leading to the finish chute I notice with amusement that they've carpeted it this year. Then it's into the chute and... finished.

It's all over! Without any injuries or breakages! 3hrs 24mins: over 16 minutes slower than the previous year but it turns out a better placing - so maybe the training and relaxed attitude did pay off. As they clip my number I'm looking for my free feed and a massage while simultaneously wondering whether I'll ever get all the mud out of my shorts and if my brake and gear cables will ever run smoothly again. But as I wander away I'm also pondering the inevitable - maybe if the weather is better I could have a crack at 3hrs next year.

