

2005 - The Kennet Bros. Look Back

It seems slightly unreal for the Karapoti Classic to have reached number 20. It's fair to say that this event has changed our lives and helped shape who we are now. How did a race with such an uncompromising course become such a monster event?

It started in the mid-1980s, when Paul and Simon became fanatical mountain bikers. Back then the Southern Cyclist magazine ran regular mountain bike articles entitled, 'The USA - An Inspiration to Us All'. Same god-damn irritating title every issue. Trouble was, there was precious little New Zealand news to report.

As president of the local cycle touring club, Paul felt he was in a position to rectify the situation. Early in 1986 he sent posters and entry forms for the inaugural 'New Zealand Off Road Bicycle Race' to shops throughout our fair nation.

In the absence of any alternative, this race would act as our first national champs, and as such, it attracted entries from all over the country (and one from Canada). There was a whole weekend of events, including the main race, which included

categories for All Terrain Bikes, Skinny Tyred Bikes, and BMX's.

This first race started from the top of Akatarawa Rd and headed southwest through the ranges before joining the current course at the top of the Devil's Staircase. Canadian Dan Maddess was the only rider with mountain bike racing experience and became the firm race favourite after completing some mighty impressive jumps near the start line during the briefing.

Of the Kennett bros; Paul was organising, Jonathan was tail end charlie and while Simon was racing, his competitive experience was limited to a Rubik's Cube competition at age 14. But something happened to Simon that day; after seeing dozens of riders sprint off into the distance at the start of this first race he suffered a panic attack that took him through to fourth place by the halfway mark.

Paul sending the inaugural 1986 race on its way



Maddess had the lead midway round the course, but suffered a puncture shortly afterwards and didn't have a pump. Neither did Simon!

Maddess would eventually come 22nd out of the 49-rider field. Then, after a couple of front-runners crashed, Simon moved into the lead. As he passed Tim Galloway on Dopers Hill, the two wondered where everyone else had gone. Tim offered Simon an apple from his backpack. Simon politely declined. On the final descent Galloway proved that flat bars are better than dropped handlebars. He regained the lead and held it to the finish.

All the place-getters appeared somewhat shocked and almost sheepish to have done so well. The first three and many of the other original riders from 1986 competed in the 20th anniversary event in 2005 - some on their original bikes. Women's winner, Anne Butler, was not there. She died in a climbing accident near Mt Cook a few years later. We remember her as a rugged, down-to-earth

woman whose physical strength was only exceeded by her remarkable friendliness.

In 1987 the course changed to travel from the other side of the ranges via Maungakotukutuku Valley and Dopers Hill to Karapoti Park. Paul again organised it all, and even managed to win it. He was the man. But he only just beat a guy on a road bike, so Paul decided the race had to be tougher.

In 1988 we did a full mountain bike recon of the Akatarawas and discovered the current loop course from Karapoti Park and decided it was a classic. Being suckers for a bit of alliteration, we coined it the Karapoti Classic, of course.

By this stage the race was actually developing a bit of a reputation and had "earned" the title. Simon and Paul took out the top two places that year and were soon referred to as the 'infamous Kennett brothers'. The tail-enders took almost six hours!

1989 saw a dramatic improvement in winning times with National Champ Grant Tyrrell shaving 16 minutes off the winning time and Kathy Lynch

taking 39 minutes off the women's record. We were all still riding fully rigid bikes with toe clips, but things were starting to get very competitive.

The bikes were tough back then too. When Keith MacLeod had a dozen spokes ripped out of his front wheel by a wayward branch on the Rock Garden, he just undid the front brake and rode on! After the race he put his head through the hole in his spokes and for the remainder of the day proudly wore the wheel like a necklace.

1991 ushered in the suspension era and times took another dive. Jon Hume won in 2:30 while Kathy Lynch became the first woman to crack the three-hour barrier. She would eventually clock up eight Karapoti Classic titles (that's '8' Lance, eight!). Her 1994 record of 2:49:42 still stands today.

In 1994 the race doubled in size to almost 500 entries, but in 1995 it almost doubled again to reach 1000 riders. This made it one of the most popular mountain bike races in the world at the time. Riders were coming from America, Australia, England, Japan and Europe.

This was when we first thought: 'We've created a monster'. We had actually quit our day jobs to concentrate on running a professional event and with the help of a small army of switched-on volunteers we were succeeding. A couple of years later the American cycling magazine *VeloNews* declared Karapoti to be one of the top 25 mountain bike races in the World.

Karapoti had arrived and so had a fleet of fast young riders.

In 1998 Kashi Leuchs set the current course record of 2:20:46. A performance that set our imaginations on fire. What are the limits? Surely someone can do sub-2:20. What sort of speed would that require on the Rock Garden or Dopers Hill? Is the course as fast as it will ever be? More people had cracked three hours back in 1994. Will increasing shelter provided by the regenerating forest help? Will mountain bikes be faster in 10 years time? Will the people who ride then be faster?

One of the beauties of the Karapoti Classic is that it has created a benchmark for mountain biking in New Zealand. From year to year, or decade to decade, riders of all abilities compare their competition by asking what time you've done at Karapoti. Riders of all age and abilities share the sense of achievement that comes with just completing Karapoti. Everyone sweats buckets on Deadwood, gets out of shape on the Rock Garden, dreads the Devil's Staircase, and grovels up Dopers Hill only to breathe a big sigh of relief back at the top and grin all the way back down to the finish at Karapoti Park... And then the tall tales start!

And perhaps it's that collective experience; the joint departure from our comfortable western lifestyles to endure something extreme, that gives Karapoti its legendary status. As one of the event t-

shirts once said 'LIFE will be EASY - after the Karapoti Classic'. Whatever, we hope it continues for another 20 years, and more.

The brothers three - (RtoL) Simon, Jonathan & Paul

