

Tales From A Tail End Charlie

KARAPOTI CLASSIC – THE TAIL END CHARLIE VERSION

Words and photography by Nick Lambert

Having procrastinated for too long before this year's 20th Anniversary Karapoti Classic I missed the entry cut off by a solid hundred or so people. With the odds of having a hundred entries not show up looking remote I took up the organisers offer to ride the event as 'tail end charlie'. The benefit being that I got to ride the course and it was free (och aye, that's just what my Scottish ancestry demands, stuff for free).

It started to look like I was fated not to ride the event at all though when the week before my bike decided to shed a couple of very essential suspension bearings all over the garage floor. Probably a good thing it happened then rather than in the middle of Karapoti though. So the ever-faithful Surly singlespeed was called into action. I hoped I wouldn't need a tail end charlie to collect me from the course!

There was an oversupply of tail end charlies who missed the actual event entry. A group of three went first, then after the 25km Challenge race started I headed off with the fifth tail-ender, John. Having raced Karapoti several times before it was immediately noticeable how enjoyable the ride was with no traffic. We could pick our lines without being dictated to by masses of riders walking (or falling) in front of us. Deadwood climb was easy but eventually I had to succumb to the gradient versus my singlespeed gearing.

As well as collecting marker tape and signs; one of the less glamorous jobs of the tail end charlie is to collect litter. We started coming across it on the first climb, mostly standard fare: empty squeeze packets, water bottles shaken out of cages and punctured tubes. But then there was some more unusual stuff, like a new tube, Power bars with one bite out of them – did the person have one bite and drop it? Or think 'I can't chew all this so I'll chuck it away'.

The excitement of looking through peoples discarded trail junk was momentarily surpassed when we came upon an injured rider after Deadwood summit. The guy riding with her had the situation under control and seemed to have a fairly good supply of hospital strength pain killers. Hmm? He waited with her while a four wheel drive came in to ferry her out.

We were riding with the other tail end charlies by now, so there was a group of five of us rolling past the marshals letting them know there was no one else to come and they could head home. We caught up to the last rider on the Devils Staircase. He wasn't injured, but was wearing running shoes and trying to climb the slippery

staircase. It's a difficult enough climb in grippy cycling shoes, let alone running shoes. But he was determined to finish under his own power, not under the power of a Land Rover. For us to catch him this early didn't bode well and from that point on he dictated our pace. We took our tail ender duties seriously and thought it would be generally frowned upon for the tail enders to pass riders. So our stops were longer as we gave him a head start on each climb.

If having no traffic on Deadwood was good, then having no traffic on the Rock Garden was legendary. This is where the Surly really shone, with fat Tioga 2.3 tyres, a high bottom bracket clearance (single 33 tooth ring only remember), and no derailleur to destroy, it was perfect for rolling down the garden.

We had been stopping at the marshal stations for a friendly chat, but one couple really stood out. They passed us in their four wheel drive before stopping to run back and give us all chocolate biscuits. This tail end charlie gig was becoming quite lucrative!

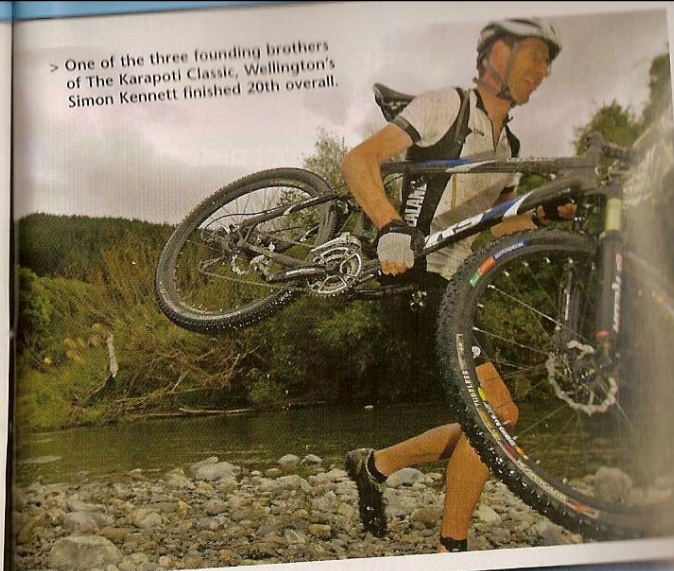
The further round the course we went the dodgier the skid marks in the gravel got. Looking at some of them we could just imagine the rider with the rear wheel locked up, dangling their inside leg hopefully, all the while fixated on the bank or drop in front of them. Fortunately none of the skid marks disappeared off the road completely but we did keep an eye out for riders that may have left the track.

Every rider who has done Karapoti will have their least favourite part, whether it's the steep climbs, the technical rock garden descent, or something else. For me the toughest part of the day was doing car park marshalling before the event even started. Most people were cruisy and relaxed, but a few must have been expecting a valet parking service or something. They got parked in the part of the paddock covered in the most cow shit. Rock-on the parking marshals, I've got a new found respect for them!

> Perks of the job – chocolate biscuit time for the tail end charlies!



> One of the three founding brothers of The Karapoti Classic, Wellington's Simon Kennett finished 20th overall.



> Tim Vincent took the overall win in the 20th anniversary Karapoti Classic by 1min30sec over local Upper Hutt favourite Wayne Hiscock and 2004 runner-up, Australian Tim Bennett, in third.

