

## 2008 - An Aussie Blog

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We'd seen some knowing looks and heard a few curious comments about the Karapoti Classic. Words like gruelling, epic, relentless, tough and honest etc, so we started to wonder whether we had brought the right tyres, fortitude or legs with us. Dan (the guy we were staying with in Wellington) was also entered in the Karapoti as too were nearly all the Welly riders we'd met previously. It seems to be a rite of passage... a must-do annual event for the serious mtb rider. All of them said it was tough. We went for a ride with Heidi and Ross up the local trails of Makara Peaks on Thursday night, and it was here that they started to let us know what to expect at Karapoti. Three really big hills apparently... and steep ones at that. Then there's the rock garden, the bogs and the hike-a-bike sections to name a few. Oh yes, and there were serious rainstorms predicted for the weekend just to make things interesting. But hey, how hard could it be? It's only 50kms, right?

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Well, pretty bloody hard as it turns out and if I'd taken the time to read through the Karapoti website (beyond finding out what date it was on) I would have learned that besides being the longest running mountain bike event in the Southern Hemisphere, it "revolves around an uncompromising, some say cruel, 50km of 4WD trails, gnarly single track, wheel sucking sludge, raging river crossings, wall to wall wilderness and huge hills that have you grinding a granny ring up but grinning like a goon on the way down. It's the toughest mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere."

The description is spot on.

The race started in age group waves, Le-Mans style across the stone strewn Akatarawa River with bikes on shoulders. A sprint up a tar road and then onto the single track through Karapoti Gorge and into the 'warm-up' climb which led to a steep drop into a riverbed, which was the start of the first big climb called Deadwood. I had an ordinary start to the race where a lot of people flew by, well before any of the real climbing. Uh oh.

The three climbs ascend to about 600m, all of them sharply and I reckon the first climb was the toughest. I had dead legs from the start and then the shock of walking the steeper sections had my heart rate peaking out. I was not alone, but riders who made it higher into each section before eventually dismounting were an inspiration to me to get further on the pedals. I'd try to ride where I could but it's pretty nasty on the legs. Then after the top there were all these rolling extra little climbs so I was never sure when the big descent into the Rock Garden would begin.

The descent down the Rock Garden was fun and fast. The Rock Garden is single track about 3k long littered with lots of big rocks and boulders all over the shop making for very interesting or downright scary line choices. There was a ride line visible from early waves and the Mojo made it possible to ride this section quickly without looking like a muppet. I passed Dan, and a little later on I passed a Taswegian guy we'd met in Rotorua. Dan was in the wave ahead, and I found later he'd flatted and was riding conservatively as he only had the one spare tube.

Next up, the Devils Staircase is freaky steep. But the nastiest bit felt shorter than the first climb and then spits you out onto a series of granny pinch and roll sections that were mostly rideable. I still had to walk a number of these but kept on trying to go further before dabbing. Traction was good and the Mojo was willing, but the legs and lungs could have done with a few months hill training. The bogs in and around Devils Staircase climb were not quite to the knee so I made sure to run with bike on shoulder rather than trash my driveline.

Bugger !



At the summit there's a water station and then huge smiles as the next chunk of distance is mostly a fast downhill called Big Ring Boulevard where I grabbed a big gear, screamed off and managed to scare myself silly on a couple of tight corners in the process. Fun was had!

The final climb up Dopers Hill was the longest at about 3km and still hurt but it felt easier than the first two. The grade wasn't as steep, though there were many little pinches to keep you honest. Getting to the top meant no more ups and the middle and big rings got a workout for the homeward leg.

The 5km downhill was a hoot and then it was time to crank big for the final 6k to the finish. I didn't have a lot in the tank, and cramps started to niggle just before I got onto the tar for the final 1k to the finish.

I was racing some guy who I'd started chatting to a few kays back. The lucky bastard lives at the very edge of the Rotorua Redwoods and was in my age group, so I just had to beat him home. It was enough incentive to push me down and into the final river crossing at pace and come out the other side to cross the line a few seconds ahead.

Shortly after we crossed the line, the heavens opened up. I was glad the rain held off, as traction would have gone out the window and could add half an hour to your ride time. Results had me in at 3:31:19 and Garrett, who was in the wave ahead, finished only a few minutes back with 3:34:17.

They're not bad times apparently, but going under 3 hours is a respected (almost magical) achievement.

Post-race we had beers and pizza with a few locals at a mates place and a number of them did some seriously fast times. Gavin McCarthy in 2:25:25, Ricky in 2:38:39 and Lisa in 3:08:39! These guys live to race, and clearly rate the Karapoti as a favourite. With local trails like this is it any wonder these guys can stomp hills? Watch out if they ever come to Stromlo.

I was trying to think which tracks I've ridden in Canberra that come close to how steep the Karapoti climbs are. If you've ridden up Webbs Ridge from Flea Creek in the Brindies (or up Gentle Annie for that matter), Karapoti climbs are similar to this but steeper or if you've ridden from Two Sticks to the top of Mount Coree, the climbs are similar to the nastier stuff near the top, but again still steeper and damn long. The Devils Staircase is freaky steep with only bits and pieces rideable (though I reckon it would be cool to see the elites charge up there at race pace to see what they make of it all).

The Karapoti was one hard race but it's certainly got us hooked. Chalk up two more Aussies dead keen to get closer to or even go under the mythical 3 hour mark. We'll be back.

If you like your pain in sharp hard fought bursts of say 50km, then [www.karapoti.co.nz](http://www.karapoti.co.nz) is the event for you.

