

## 2011 - Sifter's Perfect Race

Lying in bed at 6am, I almost managed to convince myself that what I could hear on the roof and against my windows was only wind. When my alarm went off at 7am, I was sorely tempted to turn it off, roll over, and go back to sleep. Knowing Simon and Jonty were relying on me to drive them out to the event got me up though, and a quick look between the curtains signalled that a tough day was indeed ahead...

I don't particularly like the feature 50k and while I often come up with an alternative to justify not entering (the Challenge in '08 and the Karapoti Original in '10), this year it was the main event or nothing. When I finally entered in late January, the thing that had really pushed me over the edge was knowing that I had the perfect bike for the event. (Yeah I know that can't be true, but Flux Turner has transformed my enjoyment of mountain biking and is unlike any bike I've ever ridden.) Homegrown - the NZ music festival I regret missing each year - almost threw a spanner in the works, but nothing a quick lap couldn't accommodate.

A busy couple of months, both at work and at play, meant suboptimal preparation. I was about 6kg heavier than when I rode 2:47 in 2007, but on the upside, I had a hell of a lot more experience and endurance, and a very capable new machine under me.

The dreaded Tip Track is certainly not the be-all and end-all prep for Karapoti, but it's really convenient to town, wakes up the muscle groups needed for the big climbs and trains the anti-puke reflex. As my dear friend Rich discovered back in '06, a quick TTTT (Tip Track time trial) does not guarantee a fast lap of Karapoti, and with that in mind I've generally tried to do at least one session with TTTT (two TTTTs) and a few singles to boot. This year I failed on both accounts, and the extent of my Karapoti-specific training was a single ascent one lunchtime with Simon, and a funky ride up the Red Rocks track a few days later on the weekend before race day.

By Karapoti-eve, I had a clean bike, fresh brake pads and bled brakes, and a nice fat Kenda Nevegal rear tyre on, tubeless, just like the now-obsolete Continental Vertical Pro that I picked up in a bargains-bin at NZSSWC.

The conditions on Saturday morning

motivated a couple of last-minute gear changes. I had time to install a bit of inner tube between the fork crown and brake-arch, heartily recommended as a crud-stopping mechanism the night before by Simon's brother-in-law, David Drake. Also, I canned the idea of carrying a second bottle in my jersey pocket, and opted instead for a small camelbak. I figured maximising the time both hands spent on the controls was a sound move. As well as just over a litre of water, I had a bottle of coke on the bike, a pump, tube, and multi-tool in my bag, and a small bottle of lube, a piece of rag and a banana in my pockets. 10 minutes out I also decided to carry my Ground Effect Flash Gordon (sans sleeves). With such lousy conditions, a crash or mechanical was pretty likely, and I figured I might appreciate the shell if I couldn't keep moving.

focusing on the fact that I was ahead of them until just then.

It's fair to say Karapoti scares me. It's a very intimidating course, and there's not much of it that's pleasant at full noise. Pre-race nerves are well founded in this case!

I picked up Simon and then Jonty, soon after 8am. We enjoyed the drive out to Upper Hutt, nervously noting no improvement in the crappy weather over Wellington City. We were marshalled into a paddock - temporary parking for one of New Zealand's biggest MTB events.

We were soon cruising along Akatarawa Road, and I was pretty much ready to race - only the question of the vest remained. Simon suggested a quick warm up, so we headed past

Karapoti Park for a few kilometres, turning around at the top of the first climb of any size north of the park.

Race briefing was almost over when we made it back, and I set off in search of the Didymo guys. Seems a bit silly to me that someone would wash my wheels this weekend but not the previous one (when I should have been doing a practice lap), but I appreciate the importance of people playing along. Wheels duly washed, and jacket packed away, it was time to make my way

down to the start line.

It always takes twice as long to get anywhere at this sort of event - constantly banging into friends is part of the fun. It was great to see my dear friend and sponsor Oli Brooke-White while I was chatting to Wellington Nine Peaks organiser, Asher.

At 10am, the 40-odd riders in the Pro-Elite class set off. This year the start groups were seeded, similarly to the way the roadies handle Taupo. I was in the next bunch, 130-odd self-proclaimed "Experts". Too much gas-



While I seem to love putting myself in the box, I'm not much of a racer, and I'm not great at setting goals. Instead, I line up prepared to work hard, and I do my best to keep that in mind. Mostly that works for me, though I always ride best when I'm Simon's teammate. Riding hard leads to that nasty feeling, and easing off usually makes it go away. Sometimes that's too tempting...! I've never rated my technical skills, and on a course like Karapoti, I really struggle to race others, generally concluding that I'm not good enough to keep up with whoever's just passed me, instead of

bagging, and not enough of the skills developed long ago at the Rongotai College tuck-shop queue meant that when the "gun" went, I was probably about 50 riders back at the far side of the river. At least one bike was completely dunked ahead of me, and I was relieved to have held my footing, and to be only sodden from about my navel down.

Karapoti Road was a good opportunity to make up ground before the gorge, and in many ways crucial. Starting the Wild Wellington a few weeks earlier had no doubt been good prep for this, and by the time we crossed the Karapoti River I had just latched onto the back of the lead bunch.

Any hope that the course wouldn't be too bad were immediately dispelled. The first 100m or so of the gorge seemed to be about 80% under water with the odd dry patch between massive puddles. "I guess it's a wet year" I muttered to Dan Kellow, an old Worsley Bay School-mate as we blasted through one puddle after another.

A picked my way past half a dozen or so, and whisked past one of the massive concrete blocks at McGhie's bridge with an unnervingly small safety margin. I'm not sure how many get-out-of-jail-free cards one gets at Karapoti, but that was one of mine gone right there!

As the course opened up, I could see the lead bunch of about 8 or 9 a small distance ahead, and immediately made a move to bridge to them. That done, I tucked in, and tried not to ingest too much of the filthy water flying off the rear wheels of the guys ahead. I regretted ditching my specs earlier in the gorge. They'd become inundated with crap, but realistically I should have wiped them as best I could, and left them on until the warm up climb. Luckily I avoided getting too much shit in my eyes.

There were about 4 or 5 riders charging at the front of this bunch, including Rex Humpherson, age-group record holder, and finely kitted out in a sleeveless purple CS jersey. Behind them were a few of us who would and change position every now and then as we each in turn screwed up a line or gear choice. Bushlover Clive Bennett looked like he was on his road bike on occasion, muscling up short climbs out of the saddle, while Tony Keith looked comfortable on his beautiful Turner -

his feedback had been most helpful for me pre-purchase.

The so-called warm-up climb was almost merciful, as it brought to an end the helter-skelter race up the gorge. The intensity was much more like a handicap road race than most mountain biking I've ever done. The Flux climbs beautifully, and I tried to concentrate on picking the best line on offer. My fat Nevegal was hooking up well, and I managed to stay on board for the duration of the first bit of granny-gear work.

I've done the Classic probably 7 or 8 times now, but this was the first where I wasn't passed on the horrid little descent that followed. The bottom gets steep and loose at the same time, but I managed to hold the lines I wanted, and the lovely plush travel kept things nice up top.



There was a fair bit of water coming down the stream - I'm not even tempted to call it a "track". Occasionally amongst the bubbling water I could see large slippery rocks, but ignoring them and keeping the power on seemed to be the right strategy. Soon I was out of the running water and back onto "dry" land.

There were a couple of pinches on the Deadwood climb that are just too steep for me to ride without really bugging myself, and figuring discretion was the better part of valour, I dismounted and pushed my bike up as fast as I could without actually running. Others around me weren't having much luck either, though I did witness some impressive displays of technical climbing.

The end of the Deadwood climb marked the end of my good start. I was in touch with the two Bushlovers at the top, but fluffed a couple of gear selections and then took a bad line which had me off the bike on a short

climb. I wasn't particularly urgent about getting back on the bike, and lost sight of them. Al Crossling had come back to us from the Pro-Elite start, and we see-sawed a bit, and a couple of others came past me from behind.

I started to get a bit of flow back once the drop down to the Rock Garden started, but I didn't immediately realise how conservatively I was riding. The course was super wet, and there was bed-rock and running water all over the place. I soon appreciated I was riding my Flux as if it was a rigid bike with lousy rubber, and immediately started riding more aggressively.

The first couple of small steps in the Rock Garden were no problem, but I'd already started to dismount for the first large drop-off when the guy I'd

just caught burped air out of his front tyre right beside me. Thankfully I didn't get any of his jizz on me - that would have been just plain gross! The next section was insanely treacherous, and had me really wondering if running my bike down amongst so many sharp and slippery rocks was actually a good idea.

Eventually things eased slightly, and my instincts told me it was time to get back on the bike. With both ankles intact, I leapt back on, and made what

was for me, very good progress down to the stream crossing.

I'd already committed to a lube-stop at the top of the Devil's Staircase, so riding the bogs and waterways at the bottom seemed to make sense. At the first massive step, I jumped off and threw the bike up and across my back, seat post in my left hand, and stem in my right, and suitably crucified, I started the scramble up. Remarkably, the traction on my recently purchased shoes with their hard plastic tread, was very good, and I rarely slipped. I'd also remembered to take the bungee cord off the back of my camelbak, so when the time came to put my bike down, I actually could! Previously, I'd almost always ended up with the pedal tangled in the bungee, and needed quite the contortion to get unhooked.

Actually, mostly I wheeled my bike. Apart from the odd steep carry across my back, and a small number of short descents, I didn't ride much at all. To appease my guilt, I jogged the short climbs that I probably should have

been riding. Eventually, I recognised the last little ascent, and was soon at a table sculling a cup or two of sports drink. I chased that down with a mouthful of lollies (plus a bit of dirt from my glove) and then set to oiling my chain. A guy next to me did the same.

The lube was a great move, and let me ride reasonably strongly to the top of Titi. I don't know if I actually had company, but I thought I could hear Mr-chainluber on my tail, and kept trying to ride away from him.

Apparently I looked pretty casual, at least according to Kapiti resident Rod Bardsley who was heading in to spectate. Rod did a mighty fine job selling me my first mountain bike, back in '98, and it's always good to see him, even when he's making such outrageous claims!

It was fun chucking the bike into its big ring to start the descent of Big Ring Boulevard. It had been recently graded, and would have been insanely fast in the dry. As it was, there were a few alarming moments, which went something like... "Hmmm, I'm about to ride through a couple of truck-loads of porridge... I wonder how deep and soft it is? Oh, and I have to corner half way through it... [Checks speedo...] Hmmm..."

Luckily, tyres, the bike, good fortune and whatever else is necessary in these matters all aligned nicely, and as the saying goes, I kept the rubber side down. I had a slightly sketchy moment but expertly (and fuck knows how) managed to thread both wheels between two nasty looking rocks that were poking their heads out of the track surface. I think if I'd clipped either of them I might have been fishing my jacket out, but no-harm, no-foul.

I passed Jonty and Miles Davies both fixing punctures together. I wondered if they'd hit the same rock, but was soon back to focusing on the last of the descent. I got passed by a couple of guys down here, after fucking up just about every left hand bend there was. I was managing the right-handers really well too!

After the first of two stream crossings before the Dopers climb I stopped to lube my chain again. Callum Kennedy was doing the same, and didn't seem to appreciate my "you've got

something on your cheek" comment. Of course both our faces were completely covered in crap - I thought it was funny at least!

I didn't bother trying to ride the very bottom of Dopers - the track actually looked OK, and the stream before it was very low, but the guy just ahead of me made a meal of it in some loose rock, and I was relieved by my choice. I passed a few riders up the long climb, including Ollie Whalley fixing what he reported to be his fourth puncture. Yuck!



I think Peter Arkwright was shocked I recognised him under all the muck! At least I have the decency to wear the same outfit each time!

The sun actually came out for a few moments on the climb, and as I looked down at the crap on my legs I noticed most of the dirt had dried. I suppose to amuse myself I imagined a scenario where the dirt all dried so hard I could barely pedal - a fanciful distraction for 30 seconds or so.

I walked a couple of the steeper pinches, including one section of clay that was scarred along its length with signs of tyres skidding off to one side or another, and shoe-prints. There was a second aid station just before the

top, and I picked up another place by not stopping at it. I had enough fluid to get me home.

As with the top of Deadwood, I really struggled to get going again along the top here. My legs didn't feel that strong, and the slippery conditions and frequent off-camber corners had me out of sorts. I lost a couple of places, and another when Callum passed me at the river crossing at the bottom of the descent. He had about 15 metres on me by the time we were both on our bikes, and I immediately started hunting him down. A racer lurks in me after all! That bit of entertainment was short-lived, but my disappointment at the sound of air rushing from one or other of his tyres was no doubt miniscule compared to his own.

I blazed by in the big ring!

I worked hard through to McGhie's bridge, and tried to keep the momentum into the Gorge despite the track worsening dramatically. The gorge singletrack was rocky and wet, and never quite as gravity-assisted as I want! Middle ring out of commission, I was cross-chaining it like a mofo, but my legs felt OK. My momentum was slowed temporarily as I tried to make my way past Challenge riders, at pace but safely. I took a bigger speed hit from the puddles though, and started to work out that where possible, going around them was best practice. I was less worried about the ill-effects on my bike than I was about the ill-effects on my speed.

My most nervous passing manoeuvre was of young fellow I actually bothered to alert to my proximity. I realised hollering "passing on your left" could be a bit confusing to someone who had only a handful of years knowing what left was, and with the risk of him only hearing "left" might think he was being asked to move left. He didn't - luckily for both of us - and smartly held his line while I blazed past on his left.

I caught two blokes which I assumed were the guys that had passed me at the top of Dopers just at the end of the gorge. I tried to go by hard - the roadie in me not wanting to give them a tow down the road. One did jump on, but he was kind enough to take a good turn up front a minute or so later.

I'd looked at my watch only once on course - Peter Arkwright had asked if a sub-3 was on the cards when I saw him part way up Dopers. It was 12:26 - I had no idea if 40 minutes was possible from there. It made no difference to the speed I was riding at this stage though. The finish time die was cast long, long ago.

My mate and I got good support from the many marshalls and spectators on the road. I remembered to shift into my small chainring before ploughing into the river. Not much of my bike didn't end up submerged as I took a pretty dodgy route captured on "film" by Oli and Wheels on the far shore... On the final stretch I ran off the beach, Oli's shouts of support echoing in my ears, and jumped on board for the last short stretch to the finish line.

I heard my name being called by Mick on the PA, and looked at my watch. 13:06, and so a 3:01... Mick confirmed for all and sundry, telling me I'd be sure to have a crack at 3 hours the following year.

The next few minutes was information, if not sensory, overload!

It was nice to be finished, and to have not a nick on me was quite a surprise. I soon saw Simon, and Paul with his son Adam. While moving around pre-race is slow going, post-race it's even more so. At this end, no-one's got an impending deadline, and the guys lurking around are all the familiar faces. I got the low-down on Dave Sharpe's awesome ride and saw fellow Roadworks rep and defending champ Tim Wilding. It was impressive to hear from these guys about the classy riding of young Anton Cooper who took out the win.

After a small eternity (but a very nice one, including a free bike-clean by the Didymo dude!) I made it to the beach. It was very embarrassing presenting myself to my sponsor with

almost his entire logo obscured by muck! Hopefully he keeps me on!

As Oli himself wrote in his commentary of his great photo album, the post-race river clean-up is an important tradition. After a quick chat, I got to it.

It was good to get rid of the crap on my face, and at least make a start getting rid of it from my eyes and ears. I did my legs too, and in the end thought I might as well give my jersey a bit of a spruce-up. That done, I finally put my vest on, and then put my dripping wet, and cherished, Roadworks jersey back on over it.

Before too long, my body started to protest about the temperature, and it was time to head to the car. Even bumping into Alex, and then Cabin (8th and 7th respectively), wasn't enough to slow Simon and I down considerably.



Back at the car, and in dry clothes, the lure of a hot shower was too great, and we made the call to not go back to event HQ. A couple of hours later, I was jiggling away at the Rock stage at Homegrown, and the next flight of steps I hit felt dramatically better than those I descended on my way to the concert. Active recovery at its best!

Today I've reflected on the race, and have concluded that it's certainly among my best ever performances. My official time looks to be 3:00:21, so if you consider not making the sub-3 club

"losing", then I'm the fastest loser! I'm surprised to see the guys I lost touch with above the Rock Garden: Clive, Tony and Dan, were not that far ahead of me at the end, so while I faded in sections, my overall pace hadn't dropped that far below my peers at the top of the first climb.

10th in Expert, 4th M30-39, and 32nd fastest around the course on the day are all signs of a pretty good ride. They make me wonder if it's about time I start rating myself as a mountain bike racer. I know what's needed: get my weight down below 85kg, do some focused training, and sort out some proper race nutrition. Whether those "sacrifices" ever get made (the last isn't really a sacrifice at all, is it?) remains to be seen, but it was interesting to get a glimpse of the possibilities this weekend.

Michael Jacques today described his event as "the toughest Karapoti ever". I'll quiz Simon about that in due course. In any case, there's no doubt it was up there with the worst. Bike and body are both unscathed, and in my book that's a win of sorts. As for my time, there are dozens of places I could have made up those 20-odd seconds. And for each of those, there were dozens I could have lost them and more. That's bike racing folks!

I'll no doubt be back to the event I love to hate, and hate to love. This year's was a good one to rush home from, as sifting's best done in the sun! My helmet's off to all those that didn't roll over and go back to sleep, and as always, I have much more respect for those "Weekend Warriors" that endured 4 or 5 or even 6 or 7 hours' worth than those of us that smashed around in 3 or thereabouts. Warriors indeed!

Until next year, or the year after, or the one after that...!