

My Decade of Karapoti

“That looks completely ridiculous!” So said I, when googling NZ MTB from the comfort of an apartment in British suburbia with a glass of pinot and dry feet... YouTube had delivered straight to my screen a video of the Karapoti Classic’s notorious river start.

My debut ride on Kiwi soil was undertaken with equal naivety. After a three-month sojourn by sea, my 26-inch carbon steed had caught up with its owner and a random visit to a local bike shop (VIC) resulted in friendly mechanic, Gav McCarthy, offering to take me on a tour of something called “Karapoti”. Rae Morrison (of EWS fame) was still riding lycra and ripping up the XCO U23 scene and duly tagged along. I was not fit but figured it’s *only* 50 clicks and sounds like fun.

The ride went like this: Gav rode everything in middle ring (remember triple chainsets). Rae left blood on the dancefloor down Big Ring Boulevard. I walked the entire Rock Garden. Doper’s was a never-ending story. Oh, and it rained. All day. It felt more like an imperial century than 50k and then I rode back to Lower Hutt into a Southerly. The whole day kicked my ass. And yet, I went back (albeit not the same day).

Karapoti has a certain attraction. As the oldest race in the Southern Hemisphere, an army of mountain bikers have been challenged by the rugged Akatawaras and can compare themselves to those who came before. With battles drawn over the same route, year on year on year a rich heritage of records and legends provides stat-nerd paradise for fanatics of our niche sport.

Despite technological advancements, exceptional performances have stuck like glue to the all-time 20 fastest times, such as kick-ass chicks of the mid-90s, Susan DeMattei and Kathy Lynch. I never imagined weaving some of that tapestry, but 10 years since my Karapoti baptism of rain, I own six of those fastest 20 times and a decade on the podium has yet to dim my enthusiasm.

But don’t be fooled by the glitz and glamour of such stats; hiding in the middle of results dating back to 2010 is an inauspicious debut. For nothing easy is ever worthwhile and my very first Karapoti was anything but easy.

You know you’re not in for a fast day when you’re sat trailside gluing patches to a tube. That was me at Karapoti 2010, the 25th anniversary event no less! Sat on Big Ring Boulevard waiting for glue to dry beside a selection of shredded tubes, including the ones that started in the wheels and two spares. Riding lightweight tyres that were perfectly suitable for Surrey, but less so for the Akatawaras, the Rock Garden had dished up my debut flat. With a mini-pump that’s use-by date was apparently the day before, the replaced tubes had been snagged by snakebites.

Kim’s break-through win in 2013



The first record - 2016



And so, the saga rolled on (or didn't roll on). By the time I got to Pram Track, I'd given up on the idea of fixing, gluing or inflating anything and simply rode the rim to Karapoti Gorge and then ran it in. I finished my Karapoti duathlon 33rd of 55 women in 4hrs 24min 07secs. But I finished... Mainly 'cos I had to.

I'm stubborn with a hint of the obsessive. It's a great mix for Karapoti. As with most things in life, behind any success is an equally stubborn support team. It would be remiss to reflect on my decade of Karapoti without mentioning the name Lisa Morgan. Long before we knew one another, she bested the 3hrs 10min that I would clock in 2011 by a cool three minutes and was Upper Hutt's fastest Karapoti woman before she showed me how.

It was after that 2011 race that I approached Lisa with the idea of coaching me to a strangely precise sub-3hrs 05min. She came back with a grand plan toward knocking out a sub-three in 2012, winning in 2013 and breaking the course record in 2014. I laughed nervously, thinking she was a lot crazy. But in hindsight I should have asked her for Lotto numbers, because I diligently chalked up 2:59:59 in 2012, the top podium spot in 2013 after a fierce battle with Olympian Karen Hanlen, and then a year later toppled Jenny Smith's course record.

Of course, I'm not the only Karapoti racer to have benefited from a bit more Cowbell. Karapoti Training Camps, recce rides, rider sponsorships for juniors and locals who had never done K-Day, to women's prizemoney and presenting the top 10 women at prizegiving, have all been part of Lisa's cowprint. It's that connectivity with the next gen' and those around us that make K-Day so special for our household.

Modern mountain biking has shifted left and right of centre, with purpose-built trails, spectator-friendly multi-lap races, half a dozen different disciplines, and even the addition of pedal-assist. It's a world away from the ol-skool adventure grind. That evolution has seen Karapoti struggling to maintain its place at the

centre of an increasingly eclectic sport. But it still retains a place at the heart. Not least for the local scene, who revel in inside tips for victors and tall tales trackside for the weeks before and after game day.

I felt that overwhelming community support first hand in 2013, when as the local doc by now, I became the first Upper Hutt resident to win their own race. For a glimpse of the place the great race holds within this community, you need only pop into my consulting room. A Karapoti trophy sits on the window sill, its' position replacing that of a card left by a long since passed elderly patient who had never done Karapoti, but who following my second consecutive second place in 2012, wrote his family physician a note; "Doctor's Goal for 2013: One Place Higher."

Karapoti has many such inspirational stories to tell. In 2015 Jenny Smith won her second Karapoti crown eight years and a baby after her first. In 2018 10-year-old Lara Comeskey rocked around the rugged 50k like she was riding home after school. And 2019 saw the first ever sub-2hr 30min ride by a woman with a mind-blowing ride by Samara Sheppard to tie up the Junior and Elite records 12 years apart.

In the decade since my humbling debuts in the Akatarawa's, I've come a long way and ridden a lot of kilometres. When I clinched my first sub-three, by a single second would you believe, only 13 women had broken that barrier. I've since claimed eight two hour-something finishes, and the bad-ass gang of ladies to beat three hours gets bigger every year.

Since 2011 I've been first, second or third, broken the course record twice, been part of the only all-female team to win the Open Teams prize, and kept the next generation honest as they shattered the 2:40 and 2:30 barriers. I've raced Karapoti while training for XCO, while training for 24-hour solo, while training for cyclocross... and while not training at all. I'm not sure how many more K-Day's I've got in me, but I hear no woman in her 50s has gone sub-three... So, I guess there's a way to go yet.

Where it all began - "running it in" back in 2010

