

## Champions Break Borders for Karapoti

Two years ago, Wellington-born mountain biker, Samara Sheppard, set a record at the famous Karapoti Classic mountain bike race that many consider unbreakable. But the Australian-based professional returns this Sunday hoping to do exactly that.

More than 600 riders from all ends of New Zealand have waited two months longer than normal to line up for the 36th anniversary Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic. Renowned as the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event, Karapoti is held annually in Upper Hutt in March, but got caught up in New Zealand's most recent covid-19 lock down.

"We were only a week out from race day when New Zealand went back to the Level Two restrictions," says event manager, Michael Jacques. "It was a bit of a blow, because there are big costs already paid for that we have to pay again. But this isn't just any event."

"Karapoti is renowned all over the world, so we didn't once contemplate cancelling. Within a few days of that lock down we'd announced a new date and had two months to do what is normally a years work for the new May 2<sup>nd</sup> date."

Established in 1986, the Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic is the event that kick-started the mountain bike movement in this country. Taking in a rugged 50k tour of Upper Hutt's Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, the adventurous route has remained unchanged since 1988 and past winners reads like a who's-who of the sport.



Samara Sheppard is certainly one of those. In 2009 she set a junior record that was only broken last year. In 2017 she returned to win the elite division, but narrowly missed the 2016 record of Upper Hutt's own four-time winner, Kim Hurst. Based in Australia since 2015, Sheppard has been the dominant endurance Australasian, winning Oceania titles in 2017 and 2018 and represented New Zealand at the 2018 Commonwealth Games. In the 2019 Karapoti Classic she totally rewrote the record books, finishing an unthinkable sixth overall to smash the women's record by 11min with 2hrs 29min 13secs.

With trans-Tasman borders open again, Sheppard returns in 2021 to where it all began. But the 31-year-old won't have it all his own way. Rotorua's Sammie Maxwell, the teenager who broke Sheppard's junior record in 2020, is returning. Maxwell finished second last year behind Wellington's Kate McIlroy, who won't be returning in 2021. Maxwell slashed 10min off Sheppard's junior record, so will be hunting for one spot higher on the podium.



Both women, however, will have to watch for a late entrant in African champion, Michelle Vorster. The 42-year-old veteran of the international scene represented Namibia at the 2016 Olympics and has been based in Auckland training for the Tokyo Olympics later this year. But whether she can turn her world cup circuit experience to the rugged terrain of Upper Hutt's Akatarawa Ranges remains to be seen.

It is very much the return of the champions at this year's Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic. Samara Sheppard and her husband, Kyle Ward, will be hunting for their third husband and wife winning combination. Ward, one of Australia top endurance riders, also won in 2017 and 2019, with the 2019 win coming just 38secs shy of the race record held by former world and Commonwealth champion, Anton Cooper (Chch).

Cooper, who won for the third time in 2020, is currently overseas building toward the Tokyo Olympics. But Ward illustrated his ability to race solo against the clock in 2019. Although while he's the odds-on favourite, he'll need to be wary of Karapoti bridesmaid Sam Shaw from Rotorua. Shaw finished second behind Ward in 2019 and third in 2020, and his 2019 ride was the fourth fastest ever. So he is capable of completing the podium set.

Another capable of a big step up is Nelson's Cameron Jones. Last year, at age 19, he surprised with a second place and both Ward and Shaw will be wondering how much stronger the Oceania under-23 champion will have become 14 months further on.

"It's great to have riders of this calibre turning out for the postponed event," says Jacques. "Usually, they'd be racing overseas at this time of year, but the global pandemic has changed life for everyone."



"Karapoti 2021, however, will be a different kind of race," warns Jacques. "The forecast is superb, but May makes for a colder race and muddier course. So, you'd expect strength and experience to perhaps shine through over youth and speed."

Indeed, few mountain bike races are harder on bikes and bodies than the Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic. The feature 50k is a savagely scenic tour around the Akatarawa Ranges complete with river crossings, huge hills, knee-deep bogs and wall to wall scenery. Key elements such as The Rock Garden, Devil's Staircase and Big Ring Boulevard are spoken in hushed tones of nervous anticipation and misty, sometimes bloody, memories.

Local riders Alistair Rhodes, Peter Schmitz, Francis Hoen and Marco Renall know this better than most. If they finish all four will have clocked up 30 or more Karapoti finishes, with Renall hoping for his 33<sup>rd</sup> finish. Christchurch's masters world champion Sharon Prutton (71) is looking to become the eldest ever female finisher at Karapoti, although she won't be the eldest rider on the start line.

At age 79 Upper Hutt doctor, Alistair Rhodes is entered for the 20k option and will be the eldest ever rider at Karapoti. He and brothers Paul and Simon Kennett are the only starters this year who also raced in the inaugural 1986 event. And ironically, Rhodes was also the eldest in the race that day.

The 36th Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic gets underway from Karapoti Park in Upper Hutt on Sunday at 9:00am. As well as the feature 50k Classic there is also the 20k Challenge and Kids 5k Klassic. Visit [www.karapoti.kiwi](http://www.karapoti.kiwi).

