

Champions Return for Karapoti

When the Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic lines up on Sunday, Samara Sheppard and Kyle Ward will once again be vying for the title as mountain biking's fastest husband and wife.

Established in 1986, the Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic is renowned as the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere, and the Australian-based husband and wife have both won it before. The Australian-born Ward in 2017, 2019 and 2021, while the Wellington-born Sheppard claimed 2017 and 2019. Sheppard is also the women's race record holder, while Ward has the second fastest ever time behind only Kiwi Olympian Anton Cooper.

Ward has a shot at making history in 2022. As well as being capable of breaking Cooper's record, he also has a shot at becoming only the second man to win Karapoti four times. That title belongs to New Zealand's first legend of mountain biking, Jon Hume, who took four consecutive wins at Karapoti between 1991 and 1994. Hume's final win in 2hrs 22min was a record that stood for 12 years, so matching his four titles will put Ward toward the top of Karapoti's hall of fame.

Despite Ward's chance of a piece of Karapoti history, it the best actual race is expected to be among women. In 2019 Samara Sheppard set a record of 2hrs 29min 13secs that many consider untouchable. Only 2020 winner, Kate McIlroy, has come within 10min of it. But if that record can ever be broken it might be this year thanks to a fast track and promising weather forecast combining with first class competition in current Kiwi number one, Sammie Maxwell.

The Taupo 21-year-old has interesting history of her own at Karapoti. In 2020 she broke Sheppard's 2007 junior record when finishing second to Kate McIlroy. But in the two years since she has improved vastly and her recent win at the national championship illustrated the form to claim her first win at New Zealand premier mountain bike event.



Samara Sheppard



Sammie Maxwell

Almost 500 riders from all ends of New Zealand have waited two months longer than normal to line up for the 37th anniversary Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic. Normally held annually in March, for the second consecutive year it was caught up in covid restrictions.

"The last two years haven't been great for anyone," says Jacques. "But the event industry has been one of the most consistently impacted by covid. Even now, we're allowed to hold events but the rise in covid cases means we're only getting two-thirds of our normal turnout.



Kyle Ward

"But you know, the reason events like Karapoti exist is because people like to challenge themselves. So if they're up for the challenge, then we'll organise it for them."

Indeed, few mountain bike races are as challenging as 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. Rhodes, at age 80, will be the eldest starter ever, an irony that is not lost on him as he was also the eldest in the inaugural 1986 event.

The 37th 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.

