

## Wide Open Racing In NZ's Premier Mtn Bike Race

When the Gazley Škoda Karapoti Classic lines up on Saturday, the race for line honours will be the most open affair ever seen at what is the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race.

Established in 1986, the Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic is renowned as the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. The savagely scenic tour around the Akatarawa Ranges comes 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. And it's Hall of Fame also reads like a who's-who of the sport, including Kiwi world champions like Anton Cooper and Sammie Maxwell.



*Can Caleb Bottcher make it three in a row?*

That's why it is so surprising to see such wide-open racing in 2026.

Among men, even two-time winner Caleb Bottcher (Kapiti) can't be called the clear favourite. Bottcher won in both 2024 and 2025, but this year he will be challenged by former national champion and Karapoti rookie, Matt Wilson (Akl'd). Their match-up is much-anticipated and hard to predict, but a mis-fire by either of them could open the door for experienced riders like Upper Hutt's own Gavin McCarthy to pick up the pieces. In more than 20 appearances at Karapoti, McCarthy has filled every place in the top five except first.

The women's race in 2026 is an even bigger lottery than the men's. With no previous winner on the start line, a handful of previous placegetters will fancy their chance at the top spot. Wellington's Laura Bridger and Taupo's Gabby Buchanan have been respectively second (2024) and third (2021). But local rider Myra Moller, 4th in 2022, will be looking to step up to the podium, while top runner-turned mtn biker, Susannah Lynch is tipped to go considerably better than her debut seventh place last year.

The one to watch, however, might be a 47-year-old Rotorua mother, Sonia Foote, who having finished second in 2005 and third in 2023 knows Karapoti better than most. A surprise win would make her the eldest ever Karapoti champion.



*Can Sonia Foote nab a clean sweep of medals?*

Age is a big deal at Karapoti. As the longest running mountain race Downunder, many riders have grown up with the race. Locals, Marco Renall (69) and Peter Schmitz (81), have ridden the race 36 times each, with Renall's all consecutively in the feature 50k. Wellington's Paul Kennett has ridden more than a few too. As the event's founder in 1986, he has organised or ridden most years since. This year it's riding with his son Adam, who at just 18 has ridden Karapoti every year since age 3 when he rode on a trailer bike with Dad.

More than 400 riders from all ends of New Zealand will line up for the 41st Gazley Škoda Karapoti Classic. Racing gets underway from Karapoti Park in Upper Hutt on Saturday at 10:00am. As well as the feature 50k Classic there is also the 20k Challenge and Kids 5k Klassic.

Visit [www.karapoti.co.nz](http://www.karapoti.co.nz) for info, [entry lists](#) & [race day results](#).



*81-year-old Peter Schmitz is the eldest Karapoti starter in 2026*