

Former Winner & First Timer Dominate NZ's Oldest Mountain Bike Race

A former winner and first timer claimed victory in the 36th running of New Zealand's longest running mountain bike event.

Established in 1986, the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is, in fact, the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. Based in Upper Hutt's rugged Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, this annual gathering has become the cultural hub of New Zealand mountain biking.

This year more than 600 riders took to the start line, and while covid-19 keeps international riders away the women's race was won by a former African champion and Olympian for Namibia.

Michelle Vorster lives now in Auckland and was taking in the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic as part of her build up for this year's Tokyo Olympics where she will represent Namibia again.

The favourite had been two-time winner and record holder, Samara Sheppard, a Wellingtonian now living in Australia. But on the day, the 42-year-old Vorster totally dominated, leading from almost start to finish to win by more than 11min in 2hrs 52min 04min.

Sheppard held on for second, just 29secs ahead of Taupo's Gabby Buchanan, who finished among the top three for the first time.

Having decided to race only a few days prior, Vorster was surprised at the win. "Where I'm from, i'm used to racing in the desert and the heat. The bush and mud and cold and steep hills made it hard. But I loved it."

More than 600 others loved it too. Despite a frosty 5-degrees on the start line for Karapoti's famous start - running with bikes on shoulders across the Akatarawa River - race day turned into a stunner.

They had waited two months longer than normal to line up for the 36th edition, which had been caught up in New Zealand's most recent covid-19 lock down. And when the trans-Tasman borders re-opened recently, the first to enter for the postponed Karapoti were Samara Sheppard and her Australian husband, Kyle Ward. And while they couldn't repeat their husband and wife wins from 2017 and 2019, Ward was unstoppable amongst men.

A tight group formed early on, but once on the first climb up Deadwood Ridge, Ward moved clear. Unsurprisingly, only 2020 runner up Cameron Jones (Nels) could stay close but would fall away to finish eight after his seat broke and he was forced to fashion a replacement out of a tree branch.

This left Ward well clear, while behind him Rotorua's Sam Shaw emerged ahead of a group of rising young riders. Shaw managed to hold Ward as the race moved through Devils Staircase and Dopers Hill but couldn't make any inroads in the final downhill 15 kilometres.

The Australian claimed his third Karapoti in 2hrs 16min 22secs. Shaw held on to second in 2hrs 18min 03secs, 3min clear of Palmerston North's Caleb Bottcher.

Further back in the field Lower Hutt's Mark Renall finished his 32nd Karapoti and Christchurch's Sharon Prutton became the eldest ever female finisher at age 70. Eleven-year-old Kuba Solc was the youngest rider in the feature 50k event, while in the 20k Upper Hutt doctor Alister Rhodes was at age 79 the eldest ever Karapoti finisher. This was testament to his own endurance and to how far the sport of mountain biking has come, because Rhodes had also been the eldest finisher in the very first Karapoti way back in 1986.

See www.karapoti.co.nz/history for 2021 results.