

NZ's Original Mtn Bike Race Celebrates Four Decades!

Forty years ago, mountain biking was a new fringe sport. There were only a couple of bike brands available, and any races were nothing more than a gathering of a few mates. Until Anzac weekend in 1986, when Wellington cycling enthusiast Paul Kennett sent 45 hardy souls into Upper Hutt's Akatarawa Ranges. On March 1st he'll do it again for the 40th edition of the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event.

Based in Wellington's rugged Akatarawa Ranges, 10k north of Upper Hutt, the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic was the race that kick-started mountain biking in New Zealand. Life has changed in the 40 years since, and mountain biking even more so. The one thing that remains unchanged, however, is the event itself. The Karapoti Classic is the only race where every mountain biker can compare themselves against the riders who came before them.

Very much an old-school adventure ride, the route remains unchanged. An uncompromising, some might say cruel, 50km of 4WD trails, single track, bogs, river crossings and wall to wall wilderness. Iconic elements of the course were named to tease and entice. The first climb is called "The Warm Up," because compared to what is to come that's all it is. The second climb is dubbed "Deadwood" because that's what your legs feel like at the top. The "Rock Garden", "Devil's Staircase" and "Big Ring Boulevard" speak for themselves, while the last climb is called "Pram Track" because riders often end up pushing their bikes.

The winners in 1986 were Tim Galloway and Anne Butler. Paul Kennett remembers Butler rode a 10-speed touring bike. Paul's brother, Simon, finished second just two seconds behind Galloway and recalls racing in a bush shirt and Galloway offering him an apple as they rode up the Pram Track.

Paul Kennett actually won his own race in 1987. Brother Simon won the race in 1988 and became the first to break Karapoti's magical three-hour mark. By 1989 more than 100 riders turned out, by 1995 it was up to 1000 and mountain biking, not to mention the Karapoti Classic, was here to stay.

In less than a decade a fringe fad somewhere between cycle touring, BMX and multisport had become a phenomenon. In 1996 mountain biking made the Olympics and by 2000 the cycle industry reckoned there was a mountain bike in every New Zealand family. Today the sport has half a dozen disciplines, races almost every weekend and every town has a dedicated mountain bike park.

Held on the first Saturday in March, Karapoti has remained the sport's cultural gathering. The race on every mountain biker's wishlist. And for New Zealand's best, Karapoti is still the race they most want to win.



1986 Start Line



Michelle Vorster

The Karapoti "Hall of Fame" reads like a who-was-who of mountain bike history with Karapoti often launching international careers. Kathy Lynch (Nelson) and Susan DeMattei (USA) were ranked among the top five in the world when they won the women's titles, with Lynch winning the women's race eight times and becoming our first Olympic mountain biker. Auckland's Susy Pryde (winner in 2002, 2003) and Wellington's Rosara Joseph (2005), both went on to Commonwealth Games silver medals. Nelson's Tim Vincent won Karapoti three times (2001, 03, 05) before winning the world 24 Hour title.

Upper Hutt's own Kim Hurst also won a world 24 Hour champs and was the first local to win Karapoti, with four titles between 2013 and 2018. Australian-based Wellingtonian, Samara Sheppard, also has four wins and in 2019 broke Hurst's women's race record with an incredible sixth place overall in 2hrs 29min 13secs. Just last year world under-23 champion Sammie Maxwell (Taupo), came within a minute of Sheppard's record. And let's not forget another former junior world champion in Christchurch's Anton Cooper, who has three Karapoti victories in his palmares and in 2014, the year that he won gold at the Commonwealth Games, set a race record of 2hrs 07min 57secs that still stands today.

Another former Olympian and Karapoti winner will start as favourite among women for the 40th anniversary race. In 2021 Namibian, Michelle Vorster, had just moved to New Zealand when she upset record holder Samara Sheppard. This year, in the absence of defending champion Sammie Maxwell, Vorster will need to watch for 2022 third placegetter Emma Bateup (Nelson) and a host of dark horses such as multisport specialists Mary Gray (Christchurch) and Deb Lynch (Wellington), who recently won the Coast to Coast. Fellow Wellingtonian, Mary-Ann Moller, is also expected to feature due to being the most experienced on Karapoti's brutal course.

The defending champion among men, however, is returning for another crack at Karapoti. Palmerston North's Caleb Bottcher won



Caleb Bottcher

the 2024 race by a massive eight minutes in the 10th fastest time ever (2hrs 16min 47secs). Based now on the Kapiti Coast, the 23-year-old will be pushed hard by the likes of Rotorua's Connor Johnston, who has finished second (2022) and third (2023), evergreen Wellingtonians Callum Kennedy and Ed Crossling, who won Karapoti in 2018, and Rotorua Xterra specialist Olly Shaw.

First and foremost, however, Karapoti has been a people's race for riders of all age and ability. Catering for everyone from elite to also-rans to mountain biking's off-beat fads, Karapoti celebrates all aspects of the sport. As well as the feature 50k, there's a 20k introductory race and a 5k kids' event. And while the pro's race for cash, there are amateur age grades and special categories for corporates, families, tandems and even unicycles, the best fancy dress and the worst luck. This year even sees something for cycling's latest fad - Ebikes!

"Karapoti has something for everyone," says the event organiser Michael Jacques, who took over from the Kennett brothers in 2002. "But it's the challenge off the feature 50k that every rider aspires to."

"There are tougher races and longer races. There are easier races and other races with river crossings and mud and wonderful scenery and single track. But there aren't many races that combine it all into one event like Karapoti does!"



Marco Renall

"And there are no races where the route has remained unchanged since day one. Whether you finish first or last or somewhere in between, you can compare yourself to the same placings right back to the beginning of the sport."

"Every year riders finish battered, bruised and muddied, swearing they will never return," says Jacques. "But most of them do!"

Eleven hardy souls - Wellingtonians Peter Schmitz, Mark Renall, Trevor Woodward, Jason McCarty, Lindsay Horton, Gavin McCarthy, Steve Owens, Phil Etheridge and Steve Martin, plus Palmerston North's Steve Pedley and Rotorua's Garth Weinberg - have all ridden Karapoti 25 times or more and will be on the start line again this Saturday.

Renall and Schmitz had ridden more than 30, with Renall lining up for his 36th consecutive Karapoti, while at age 80 Schmitz will be the eldest starter.

The 40th Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic starts at 10:00am on Saturday 1st March at Karapoti Park in the Akatarawa Ranges. Visit www.karapoti.co.nz.



Peter Schmitz