

New-School Winners at NZs Ol-School Mtb Race

The Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is renown as a race for experienced campaigners. A course so tough, that it can take riders several years to find their potential over the 50k lap of the scenic but savage Akatarawa Ranges. Until 2026, that is, when two young riders took line honours and one in his very first time at what is the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event.

Established in 1986, the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is thought to be the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. Based in Upper Hutt's rugged Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, the course is an old-school adventure ride featuring huge hills and river crossings amid remote, rugged and historic forest trails.

The winners, however, were decidedly new-school. In several attempts, Taupo's Gabby Buchanan had yet to leave an impression at Karapoti. But a third in 2021 had promised more one day, and today she delivered that.

Buchanan and Wellington's Mary-Ann Moller found themselves with an early lead on the opening 5k through Karapoti Gorge, with Moller later saying "We got a gap, so I just thought we should use this."



A happy Gabby Buchanan



Punter conquering the famous Rock Garden

That attitude saw the two caught up in a tight tussle that lasted until the finish line. Buchanan always had the upper hand, opening up a small lead on the opening climb up Deadwood Ridge. But Moller refused to let her get out of sight and was still within a minute at halfway over the top of Devil's Staircase.

Buchanan stretched that out on the final climb to almost two minutes, saying later, my legs were really good and I knew Mary-Ann was still close so I couldn't let up.

And Moller was chasing, closing up over the final 10k down Dopers Hill and through the Karapoti Gorge to the finish line. But Buchanan had things in hand and crossed the line with a 69sec gap and her best ever time at

Karapoti of 2hrs 59min 45secs. Behind Moller, Lower Hutt's Laura Park was third just 23secs ahead of Wellington teenage standout Amelia Burkhart.

Rookies aren't meant to win Karapoti. History points towards riders needing a few years to come to grips with the steep climbs, river crossings, rock gardens and bogs. Defending champion, Caleb Bottcher (Kapiti), finished second and third before winning in 2024 and 2025. But Auckland's Matt Wilson decided the unknown meant he had nothing to fear and finding himself leading on the first climb he pinned his ears back and went for it.

This was a brave tactic. Despite race day dawning to clear blue skies, the famous route was more savage than ever following a summer of unseasonal storms. And lack of course knowledge did see Wilson caught by Bottcher and Wellington's Jesse Cseh on the ride down the treacherous Rock Garden.

"That was pretty full-on. They almost caught me again, but I hit the Staircase hike-bike and got away again."



Matt Wilson was a rare rookie winner



Brodie Pidcock sending it in the Kids' 5k

And get away he did, eventually opening up a 2min 09sec gap to nab his first Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic in 2hrs 15min 27secs. A disappointed Bottcher held on for second, 4min clear of Cseh.

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.

Eldest finisher in the feature 50k this year was Wellington's Peter Schmitz, who along with Marco Renall has ridden the race more times than anyone at 37.

Porirua's Pidcock family shone in the Kids 5k, with three boys taking wins and records in their age groups, while the 20k Challenge was one for the ages when two teenage girls beat not only the entire women's field, but also all the men. Porirua's Sophie Hiswin was first home, breaking her own junior record by three minutes in 1hr 07min 57secs and finishing just 93secs ahead of fellow teenager Zoe Anderson from Whanganui.

Full results at www.karapoti.co.nz/history