

So You Want To Take On Karapoti

Whether you're tackling the legendary 50k Classic, or taking your first taste via the 20k Challenge, Karapoti is not an event to be taken lightly. But it needn't be a barrier because when you break down what it takes to conquer Karapoti, everybody who ever sat on a mountain bike has the basic ability to meet their personal goal. With a well-planned approach, Karapoti is an eminently achievable challenge.

The great thing about mountain biking is that regardless of age, ability or ambitions there's a place in this sport for everyone. And regardless of your ambitions, everyone that rides a mountain bike has the same basic goals: we all want to climb better, descend faster, ride further and crash less. In short - we all want to be better mountain bikers. But what many miss is that regardless of their place in the pecking order, we should train essentially the same.

The Laws of Physiology

Without delving into the land of lab coats and rectal thermometers, the physiology behind exercise is essentially very basic. Every person in every sport should be applying the same principle. If you live by this principle you'll never be far from good form.

The key is understanding that the human body is an adaptive organism. When placed under stress our body actually adapts to become better at coping with that stress. Relative to lying on the couch sipping a beer, mountain biking is stressful. But if you regularly partake in reasonable amounts of that stress, the body will become better at handling it. In short - we become better mountain bikers!

Armed with that wisdom, all you really need now is to know how to apply it. Firstly you have to understand that the body doesn't adapt while you're stressing it. All the stress (training) does is tell the body that it needs to adapt otherwise it will break down in some way, usually through illness or injury. The actual adaptation only happens if you allow the body a chance to recover from the stress. So the principle is actually a scientifically proven formula:

Adaptation means improvement. And not merely in your immediate performance, but also your ability to handle more stress (training). So in the long term the well planned application of this stress + rest scenario will allow you to handle more training, which means you force more adaptation, which means you continue getting faster and stronger.

If you made it this far through the article, I can hear you mumbling, 'OK, so what you're telling me is ride a bit longer or a bit harder than last week and I'll force continued adaptation and improvement.' This is true and is basically how most people naturally end up training. But you can take it further than this, because armed with a bit more knowledge you can tailor this formula to suit your own unique circumstance.



STRESS + REST = ADAPTATION



TRAINING + RECOVERY = IMPROVEMENT

Identify The Challenge

The first thing is to identify what you're training for. Are you training for Karapoti's 50k Classic or the 20k Challenge? Are you hoping to place in your category, or simply keen to go faster than last year? Maybe you're a rookie hoping to make it around for the first time, or maybe you're looking to join Karapoti's prestigious Sub 3-Hour Club. Does your job mean that much to you? What other commitments do you have in your life? All these questions decide how much of a commitment you can make to Karapoti training.

If you're new to the sport and/or have purely recreational goals, then three rides per week gradually building up to seven hours training per week is ample. If you're trying to beat your mate, improve your time, slip into the prize list or get into Karapoti's famous Sub-3 Hour Club, then four to five rides per week gradually building up to eight to 10 hours of training per week will see you approaching 85 percent of your potential. If you're wondering about that last 15%, well it requires almost twice as much work and is usually reserved for the elite.

The guideline above will work for anyone provided you have 10 to 15 weeks prior to race day. The first four to eight weeks is building to the peak weekly volume, following by four weeks holding peak volume before a 1-2 weeks taper so you arrive sharp and fresh for K-Day.

Specificity

The next step is ensuring that you make the best use of the time you're about to put in. It's called specificity and after recovery it's the most overlooked aspect.

As an adaptive organism the body does more than merely get stronger. It also gets more efficient via a mixture of aerobic function, muscular/skeletal strength and also neuro-muscular function.

This latter aspect is important: every movement we make is recorded and processed via our central nervous system so that the next time we do that activity, whether it is mountain biking or tap dancing, the body has adapted to enable us to do it more efficiently. So not only do we get stronger, but also technically more proficient, which means improvements in everything from bike handling to how much fuel we burn.

The point here is this: If we train in a manner that is specific to our end goal then we'll be stronger, faster and more technically proficient for that particular race. So instead of riding our favourite forest loop every weekend, what we should be doing is assessing Karapoti's specific demands and simulating them in training so that the body can adapt before race day.

How much climbing is there? How much descending? How much mud? Is the surface clay or rocks? How technical is it? How hot will it be? Are there any bike carry sections? How long will you be racing for? All these questions and more should form the specificity of your Karapoti training plan.

Rules Of Thumb

With a better understanding of how the body reacts to training, you can make better use of the time you put in. In regard to the Stress vs Rest formula, the stress factor is obviously regular riding. But to further refine the stress you break down the elements of the race you are training for and build those factors into your training.

The central nervous system reacts best to overloads of stimulation so rather than trying to simulate the entire Karapoti course in every ride it's better to attend to one element at a time. The race is long and hilly, with a mixture of fast riding and very technical riding. So if you're riding say four times a week, you might split these rides into one long endurance ride, one hilly ride, one technical ride and one undulating ride at a solid effort.

The Long Ride... might start at 50 percent longer than your average weekly ride and then over a four to 12 week period (depending on starting fitness) gradually build up to equal the time you expect the race to take you. It's important not to push long rides too hard because you can't build consistent training if you need several days rest afterward. This long ride should undulating to hilly, but not hugely challenging or technical terrain. Good 4WD tracks are perfect, or even some road cycling. It may not seem specific, but in road cycling or good 4WD tracks you get a much better constant effort that builds far superior endurance. Just about all the world's best mountain bikers do half of their training on a road bike.

The Hilly Ride... is a great way to get stronger at climbing while becoming more proficient at descending. Initially, while you're building fitness, just go for a ride of 60-90min and include half a dozen good hills. But after a month or so turn this ride into hill reps where you find a hill of 5-10min long and work up it at race-type effort, then ride down to recover and work on descending skills. Repeat this process five to 10 times in the one workout. If you do this workout once a week for four to six weeks you'll not only get better at climbing but the leg strength will assist all your riding.

The Technical Ride... is actually a pseudo recovery day where we don't ride that hard, but make it extremely technical. But rather than do your favourite rough ride, sometimes it's better to pick a short circuit where you get a 10min stretch of really rough riding & 2min long hill that isn't too steep. This gives you practice on rough terrain and peddling technique. Ride this 10min stretch over and over again in one workout. This way you'll get more technical riding within the one workout. It's important that you take it reasonably easy on this technical day. What we're doing is training your neuro-muscular system to the demands of technical mountain biking.

The Solid Ride... is an important factor to build your upper aerobic ability and place non-stop stress on the specific leg muscles used in cycling. Again, this is a good ride to do on the road. But as you get closer to Karapoti do it on cross-country so that you get used to keeping the pressure up on rough ground. Low-key races are also a great way to achieve the same benefits.

To sharpen up for race day, in the final four weeks you can split this solid ride into an interval session where you ride 5min absolutely 100 percent, followed by 5min easy to recover before another 5min at 100 percent. You would repeat this process five to 10 times in one workout. A more serious rider doing five or more rides per week might do both a solid ride and an interval session per

week, but should always allow 48 hours between intensive sessions such as this.

Outside of these key workouts you need also to work in the various surfaces encountered at Karapoti. Some uphill & downhill on steep, gravelly tracks, some downhill on clay tracks, some hard riding on soft ground, some bike carrying uphill is also a good idea; you get good fitness gains for this by doing some running.

Recovery While Training... is the most overlooked aspect of training, both in the short term and long term. If you're riding four or five days a week you don't need to think too much about short term recovery because you have two or three days of non-riding during the week, all you have to do is schedule the days off to follow particularly long or intense workouts. However, you do still need to be aware of adequate recovery on a longer-term basis.

Most serious overtraining, illness or injury comes about by prolonged training without allowing for recovery. The rule of thumb here is that you shouldn't do more than two to four training weeks without an easier week to allow for total adaptation. During this recovery week, you still train the same days and do the same workouts, but cut them all back by 50 percent. This way you are still training specifically for your goal while allowing for adaptation.

The long term recovery applies to everyone, but the short term recovery for anyone training more than five times per week will effect how often you have to take long term recovery. Essentially, you need to take easy workouts after every long ride or high intensity ride. If you train every day, when you take an easy week (every two to four weeks) it often pays to take a couple of days off to allow total recovery before starting the next training block.

The Schedules

Below you'll find some suggested schedules based on the levels of commitment we talked about earlier. It caters for both the 20k Challenge and 50k Classic, with people wanting to take on the full 50k needing to look toward to higher end of the given training range.

The starting point for the schedules assume that you have been riding at least 60min, two to three times a week for several weeks. The suggested training range (e.g: 1.5-2hrs) allows you to adjust the amount of your training on any given day as per your fitness, lifestyle demands or rate of recovery.

Ideally you would start at the lower end of the range and work up to the higher end of the range over 12 to 16 weeks. Remember, though, that a big part of this picture is to take that recovery week at least once a month. A good plan might be to schedule a low-key race every month and schedule your recovery week to lead in to the race. This gives you the recovery week and a minor goal to test your progress.

Remember too, to taper back before Karapoti. The tougher the race the more you need to taper. But sometimes the body has a minor rebellion when you cut back because it's become used to working hard every day. So the best way to taper is to gradually decrease volume while maintaining the intensity of the workouts.

Karapoti demands fresh legs, so try a three week taper. Three weeks out cut your training volume by 15 percent. Two weeks out cut another 15 percent. Then on race week cut again by 15 percent. But just as with recovery weeks, you cut the length of each workout while maintaining the intent and intensity of all workouts.

Sample Training Schedules

	BEGINNER <i>4-6hrs / wk</i>	INTERMEDIATE <i>6-9hrs / wk</i>	ADVANCED <i>8-12 / wk</i>	SERIOUS / ELITE <i>14hrs+ / wk</i>
Mon	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Mtb 1.5-3hrs Easy, technical
Tues	Day Off	Mtb 1-1.5hrs Hard, hillwork	Mtb 1.5-2hrs Hard, hillwork	Mtb 2-3hrs Hard, hillwork
Wed	Mtb 1-1.5hrs hard, hillwork	Day Off	Day Off or Road Cycle 1-1.5hrs Easy, undulating	Road Cycle 1.5-3hrs Easy
Thur	Day Off	Day Off or Road Cycle 1-1.5hrs Easy, undulating	Mtb 1.5-2hrs Solid, undulating	Road Cycle 2-3hrs Solid, undulating
Fri	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off or Mtb 1-2hrs Easy, technical
Sat	Mtb 1-1.5hrs easy, technical	Mtb 1.5-2hrs easy, technical	Mtb 2hrs 20km TT or low key race	Mtb 2-4hrs 20km TT or low key race
Sun	Road Cycle 1.5-3hrs easy, hills (mtb on good surfaces is ok)	Road Cycle 2-4hrs easy, hills (mtb on good surfaces is ok)	Road Cycle 2-4hrs easy, hills (mtb on good surfaces is ok)	Road Cycle 4-6hrs easy, hills (mtb on good surfaces is ok)