

Surprise Winners Roll NZ's Premier Mountain Bike Race

It was billed as a field day for the defending champions, but the 33rd running of the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic mountain bike race saw a first-time winner and former winner upset the form books to take out New Zealand premier mountain bike titles.

Established in 1986, the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic is 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 and rugged forest trails.

This year more than 600 riders from eight countries met perfect race day weather, but a course damped down by overnight rain and high humidity. Defending champions, Samara Sheppard (Wgtn) and Kyle Ward (Australia), were expected to be challenged hard by 2016 champions Kim Hurst and Jack Compton.

Hurst is a local legend in the Upper Hutt race. In eight years she has won three times, set the current womens race record, ridden five of the 20 fastest female finishes at Karapoti, and never finished outside the top two. But despite Hurst's record in her home-town race, the recent form of Oceania champion Samara Sheppard made her the bookies bet. But what happened next was an epic account of both the expected and unexpected.

Sheppard, who in the weeks before had won the Australian series and Oceania title, confirmed her favouritism by hitting the front after only a few kilometres. Hurst would later say, "When Samara came past me early on riding a pace that I assumed was just too hot for me, I thought I was watching my race record ride away."

Certainly, Sheppard looked every bit the winner, opening five minutes in the first half of the race and then stretching that out to a huge 11-minutes by the time she crested Dopers Hill with only 15k left to ride. So imagine Hurst's surprise, when shortly after cresting Doper Hill herself, she passed Sheppard on the side of the track attending to a puncture.

"She just yelled, 'Go Kim' and I was like 'No way!'," said Hurst, "It was a massive opportunity that I wasn't going to ignore."

In a nail-biting finale, Hurst threw caution to the wind and over-cooked Karapoti's rugged route to suffer a puncture of her own in Karapoti Gorge with only 5k to go. Knowing Sheppard would be chasing hard, Hurst said, "There was no way I was going to lose this lead, so I decided to ride it in and try and hold on."

The popular Upper Hutt doctor did exactly that, finishing exhausted on her flat tyre to claim a fourth Karapoti win four minutes clear of Sheppard and Kapiti's Marg Leyland.

Hurst was ecstatic with the unexpected win, dedicating it to her mother-in-law who had passed just two weeks prior. Sheppard was gracious in defeat, blaming herself for not being prepared enough with spare tubes for a race as rugged as Karapoti. The loss, however, was tempered somewhat by finding out that while racing she had been selected for the Commonwealth Games.

The men's race was somewhat less nail biting, but no less surprising. If Kyle Ward couldn't repeat his win, it was expected that 2016 Jack Compton would. Compton's 2016 victory was the second fastest ride ever at Karapoti (2hrs 10min 25secs), behind only the 2014 race record of 2hrs 07min 59secs by reigning Commonwealth Games champion Anton Cooper. In 2017 Ward win came after Compton punctured with 5k to go, so their rematch this year was expected to dominate the race for line honours. Except none told local standout Ed Crossling.

Crossling has been a big part of the national cycling scene for more than a decade, including seven top-10 finishes at Karapoti, but all without breaking through with a major national win. But a third in 2017 behind Ward and Compton and a win later in the year at Rotorua's Whaka 100 had indicated that he might be ready to step up.

The opening kilometres at this years Bluebridge Karapoti Classic saw Ward and Compton sitting amid a strung-out group of contenders that included former placegetters Crossling, Brendon Sharratt (Wanganui) and Tom Bradshaw (Wgtn) and teenage standout Cam Jones (Nelson).

The first climb of the day, up the 575m high Deadwood Ridge, created the first surprise of the day, with Compton falling out the top five. By the time the race got to the aptly named Rock Garden, the second surprise of the day had emerged with Ed Crossling leading Ward and Sharratt into the perilous downhill section.

The Rock Garden and following climb up Devils Staircase blew the race open, with Ward taking over the lead over the high point of the race at 613m. Behind him Crossling and Sharratt were staying close, but Tom Bradshaw crashed out on the Rock Garden and got a helicopter ride home courtesy of a fractured shoulder.

The race was won, however, on the final climb up the 574m high Dopers Hill. On a track so steep it is aptly named the "Pram Track" because most riders have to push their bikes, Crossling simply rode away, opening a two-minute lead that

he held on the final 15k to the finish to win his first Karapoti title in 2hrs 18min 05secs. Two minutes behind him, Ward held on second ahead of Sharratt, who claimed his third podium spot in eight years ahead of Cam Jones and Wellington's Callum Kennedy.

In a race as renowned as the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic there are always highlights outside of the podium. Life member Trevor Woodward continues to foot it with the best, finishing 10th overall at 54 years of age and two decades after finishing second. At the other end of the field, Wellington's 73-year-old Peter Schmitz was the eldest and continued his own record of 29 finishes being more than any other rider. At the other age of the age spectrum, 10-year-old Lara Comeskey became the youngest ever female finisher of the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race.

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