

## Champion Returns to Karapoti

Six years ago, Christchurch mountain bike phenomenon, Anton Cooper, set a Karapoti race record that many thought would never be broken. But the world and Commonwealth champion returns in 2020 chasing exactly that.

More than 600 riders from nine countries will line up in Upper Hutt for the 35th anniversary of what is the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event.

Established in 1986, the Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic is the event that kick-started the mountain bike movement in this country. Taking in a rugged 50k tour of Upper Hutt's Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, the adventurous route has remained unchanged since 1988 and past winners reads like a who's-who of the sport.

Anton Cooper is certainly one of those. In 2011, at age 16, he became the youngest ever winner of New Zealand's most famous mountain bike event and went on to win the world junior title later that year. In 2014 his record-breaking ride of 2hrs 07min 57secs launched the Cantabrian on a stellar year that include Commonwealth Games gold. This year he hopes another standout Karapoti might lead to an outstanding Tokyo Olympics and he has already kicked things off by winning the Oceania title.

Cooper, however, won't have it all his own way. While 2019 winner Kyle Ward (Australia) is not returning, the 2019 runner, Sam Shaw, is. The Rotorua rider clocked the fourth fastest Karapoti ever last year and will be keen to improve on that. Cooper hasn't ridden Karapoti's gruelling route since 2014 either, so Shaw, who was fifth at the Oceania championship, has more recent experience there. The Oceania under-23 champion, Cameron Jones from Nelson, is also a podium contender.

*Anton Cooper*



Another with recent Karapoti experience is 2019 women's runner up, Kate McIlroy. The former world mountain running champion and Olympic triathlete has excelled at road cycling and mountain biking in recent years. Last year she debuted at Karapoti with the second fastest time ever, finishing seven minutes behind Samara Sheppard's record smashing win of 2hrs 29min.

Sheppard is a recent withdrawal due to injury, which leaves McIlroy as odds-on favourite. But she'll need to be aware of Australian standout Karen Hill and Taupo up and comer Sammie Maxwell. Hill recently won the Victorian state championship and the Mitas Terra three-day race, while Maxwell recently won the New Zealand under-23 title and was second at the Oceania championship.

"Conditions for Saturday's race are expected to be warm with the chance of light rain, but after a long dry spell event manager, Michael Jacques, says: "The course is running very fast."



*Kate McIlroy*

"Anton definitely has a chance of breaking his own record," says Jacques. "2014 was dry too, but this year key parts of the course such as the Rock Garden and Devils Staircase and Pram Track are probably in close to the best shape ever."

Few mountain bike races, however, are crueller than the Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic. The feature 50k is a savagely scenic tour around the Akatarawa Ranges complete with river crossings, huge hills, bogs and wall to wall scenery. Key elements such as "The Rock Garden," "Devil's Staircase," and "Big Ring Boulevard," are spoken in hushed tones of nervous anticipation and misty, sometimes bloody, memories.

Local riders Peter Schmitz, Francis Hoen and Marco Renall know this better than most. With 29 consecutive Karapoti's to their credit, all three are lining up for number 30 on Saturday. Schmitz is 75 and will take on the 20k option this year but can't even claim to be the eldest starter. That will go to Upper Hutt doctor, Alister Rhodes, at age 78.

Rhodes' ride will be special. At this year's 35th anniversary he and Wellington's Simon Kennett will be the only starters who also raced in the inaugural 1986 event. Both are riding the 20k option.

The 35th anniversary Gazley ŠKODA Karapoti Classic gets underway from Karapoti Park in Upper Hutt on Saturday at 10:00am. As well as the feature 50k Classic there is also the 20k Challenge and Kids 5k Klassic. Visit [www.karapoti.kiwi](http://www.karapoti.kiwi).

*Alister Rhodes*

