

# 2012 - Karapoti Is Never Cancelled

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March in the Capital is typically the most settled month. So no one ever envisaged New Zealand's longest running mountain bike event could ever be called off due to bad weather.

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While Karapoti had thrown up rough weather in the last two years, the previous nine had been clear blue skies. Last year, in fact, was possibly the wettest ever but didn't come close to flooding. I've ridden the route in the heart of winter trying to get a handle on what is unsafe, but have never not been able to get around the course. So, when the weather for this year's Merida Karapoti Classic was forecast for southerly gales and heavy rain, we didn't think the event would be affected any more than previous. Now we know!

None of this is to say that we weren't giving the weather its due.

On Thursday I talked to the Met Office, who gave a more exact forecast but didn't overstate any cautions. On Friday we set up Karapoti Park in sunshine and light winds. The rain didn't start until just after nightfall and the winds arrived about midnight. We went through our planning one last time, but went to bed thinking we were in for nothing more than another wet year. We'd had heavy rains before, the event venue and course is very protected from southerly winds, and we have huge confidence in our search and rescue providers, Upper Hutt Community Rescue.

*Checking out the smallest river crossing!*



## Best Laid Plans...

At 6:00am on race day my 45 year old bladder woke me up, so I took a walk in the rain to see what the river was doing. It was the highest I've ever seen it and raging. Looking at the Karapoti Road Bridge I thought it was about one and a half metres higher than normal. I knew straight away we wouldn't be racing. And so the fun began.

Despite having never thought Karapoti could be flooded out, we did have a plan. One of the reasons Karapoti is held on a Saturday is so we can postpone to Sunday if need be. The first stage was to consult Upper Hutt Community Rescue and our course manager, who both agreed that these river drop as fast as they come up and there was a chance of holding the event the next day if the rain eased back as forecast. So at 7:00m we postponed to Sunday.

Once decided the next step is to communicate the fact. Most people read it on the website or heard it on Newstalk ZB cancellations, others heard it on a couple of live radio interviews I managed to organise. The rest were turned around by marshals about 5k before Karapoti Park to avoid traffic congestion.

The next priority was briefing volunteers, then we needed to assess river levels and track conditions for Sunday.

Karapoti's river crossings are a big part of the event's iconic status. Five different waterways are involved; the Akatarawa River, the Akatarawa River West, Cederholm Creek, Dopers Creek and an unnamed side stream just 1k into the

course. In winter weather all these crossings can flood, but the most problematic is the final crossing of the Akatarawa West River, after Dopers Hill, just 8k from the finish. It is possible that you could ride 42k of the 50k race and not be able to finish.

Upper Hutt Community Rescue drove into the bottom of Dopers Hill and at 3:00pm reported that the river was at least a metre higher and 50 percent wider than normal, and flowing very fast. Which is to say it was still crossable, but only by strong, experienced outdoor types.

## Defining Unacceptable Risk

This wasn't promising, but rain was forecast to drop away and the Akatarawa River West tends to drop fast, so there was a strong chance we could race on Sunday. This actually made the situation worse: "Can't race now, but maybe tomorrow, if you're a big strong brute with good skills, and if it stops raining..." But in conditions like this you can't hope it all works out, so we sat down and listed the variables and how we'd deal with issues that might arise. And once we did the picture became crystal clear.

The issues were seven-fold:

- 1) At 3:00pm it was still raining more and longer than forecast. Even if it stopped now rivers would be considerably higher than any other year.
- 2) The winds and temperature would still be extreme on Sunday.

*The Akatarawa River Raging on March 3*



- 3) If it continued raining the combined temperatures would introduce the additional risk of hypothermia.
- 4) The course would be tougher than ever before and likely to create more crash-induced medical issues than we could cover, even with our normal 11 first aid stations, 25 to 30 personnel and excellent communications.
- 5) The weather was such that helicopter backup would not be available.
- 6) Extreme conditions would be harder on bikes, which created an added issue of more stranded riders than we could cope with.
- 7) While many would manage and enjoy the toughest ever Karapoti, and while we were already getting emails and texts about individual responsibility, we had no way of knowing how many were up to it and how many were not. And that was not responsible.

We debated all these aspects, but after almost an hour Upper Hutt Community Rescue just said, "Look, we're not happy with the level of risk."

In more than 20 years organising events Upper Hutt Community Rescue are the best emergency providers I've worked with. If they weren't happy with the risk, neither was I. Karapoti as we know it wasn't happening.

#### **To Cancel or Not to Cancel? That is the Question...**

Part of "the plan we never envisaged using" did actually include an alternative course designed to avoid flooded rivers.

The venue is just 10k from the normal Karapoti and the route is organiser-friendly in regard to marshalling and emergency support, all of which means it can be organised at short notice. But we'd never envisaged gale force winds and floods at the same time. On their way back from checking river levels Upper Hutt Community Rescue reported extreme gusts on the top parts of the alternative course. The winds weren't forecast to subside, so at 4:30pm we were left with no choice but to cancel the event completely.

In the days and weeks since I have never questioned that decision. Everyone involved agreed it was the right thing to do. Some from outside the circle felt river levels would drop enough to run the full course on Sunday. The river levels did drop, but the rain lasted longer than forecast and the gales and temperatures were more extreme than forecast. It was all too touch-and-go.

When heavy rain and high winds combine, there is very real risk of tree-fall. This year Wellington Regional Council spent significant weeks reinstating access to the course after a winter of severe earth slips and tree-falls. Just a week before the race our course crew had spent three hours removing a massive totara tree blocking the climb up Deadwood Ridge.



*Karapoti Take-2 on March 18. Same river!*

While the chance of a tree falling on a participant isn't high, it is possible. But the bigger risk is a tree fall or earth slippage blocking emergency access. If you can't guarantee first aid in such testing conditions, then you shouldn't be running the race. So we didn't!

Of course, a few keen endurance junkies did ride Karapoti that weekend. But all reported tough conditions, tricky river crossings and cold weather. All agreed it was not safe to send 1000 riders around there.

As I said on a Radio Sport interview on the Sunday, "50 percent of riders would have been fine; 25 percent would have struggled but made it; but the final 25 percent would have been in trouble. That's 250 riders, and we could never cater for that many issues."

#### **Karapoti Is Never Cancelled!**

Despite knowing we'd done the right thing, the crew were pretty quiet as we packed up and headed for home. We knew how gutted the participants would be, but for us Karapoti is a year-round operation and to have it all go down the almost literal drain was the definition of gutting.

For me personally, however, to cancel the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere was unthinkable. As we packed up in the rain a few disgruntled riders had even approached me less than charitably questioning a line on the website, "Postponements: Yeah, right. Karapoti is never cancelled"... So on the drive home I was feeling a tad pissy, which in my case usually leads to fresh motivation.

When I was a kid my parents hated it when something didn't go right for me. My wife and kids hate it now. Be it a bad race, missed deadline or bad job trimming the hedge, I tend to turn into a hyper-focused, obsessive, compulsive, sleepless robot until such time as I've rectified said perceived problem.

Anyway, fast forward to the Monday after what should have been Karapoti. After I'd sat staring at a cup of coffee and scribbling notes on the newspaper my long-suffering wife finally said, "You're going to organise another Karapoti aren't you." I just grinned.

#### **Karapoti Take-2**

To say that decision was a tad hasty is an understatement. In two weeks we had to string together months of work: concessions, permissions, finding and reorganising volunteers, arrange and re-mow farm paddocks for car parking, get Upper Hutt Community Rescue back together, make another course maintenance trip, mark the course again, get the electronic timing people back, work out how many of the 1000 riders would come back, clean up the new entrant data.



*Karapoti Park on March 3 (above) and March 19 (right).*

Most people accepted the refund thing. Amidst all the emails, calls and texts we had less than 20 complaints. But one of the reasons we organised Karapoti Take-2 was to provide some value for the people who were willing and/or able to have another crack. It put a good-sized dent in the profit margin, but when almost 500 riders returned to perfect weather and a fast track the 27th Merida Karapoti Classic went from the worst of years to the best of years.

Why? Because in another 27 years everyone that was involved will remember 2012 as the year we ensured Karapoti would always be the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event.

Additionally we had to deal with unique issues: firstly working through traffic management issues for a road cycle event that passed Karapoti Park the same day, and then discovering that there wasn't a marquee or stage to be had anywhere in the North Island that weekend. But I figured if they were the worst that fate could throw up, we'd be ok.

During this frantic fortnight we fielded hundreds of queries ranging from "great news you're running Karapoti again" to "why are you organising your event on my race date," to "how do I get a refund."

The refund thing was a hot topic. But to be blunt, most major events have a no refund policy for the simple reason that regardless of whether an event goes ahead or not, everything has to be paid for. And to be totally honest, for some of us event management is how we make our living.

Not that this game is a licence to print money. We organise four major events a year and in every case we guarantee their longevity with a formula whereby entry fees pay for the organisational costs, then we make our money mostly from sponsorship and merchandise. So the user pays for their event and the money we make is via our own work and reputation. This model is not only fair, but it guarantees longevity because even if sponsorship is scarce the event still goes ahead.

