

# NZ's Original Mountain Biker

Keith McLeod saw his first mountain bike in 1982 and fell in love. He built New Zealand's first custom-made mountain bike and rubbed shoulders with American mountain biking movers and shakers like Tom Ritchey. He organised New Zealand's first mountain bike race, rode in the inaugural Karapoti, raced at the first mountain bike world champs, opened New Zealand's first specific mountain bike shop... He was the father of the sport here and the only thing he likes more than riding is talking about it. So we did exactly that.

**Keith, you're often attributed as being New Zealand's original mountain biker. How did it all begin?**

*I'm not sure I was the first. I started riding in 1983, when we came home after living in the States for several years. I brought back a mountain bike I'd been building up. The only other guy in Christchurch with one was Dave Fenton, who was more of a touring guy. I wasn't really into that, I wanted to blast down some hills like I'd seen them doing in the States.*

**So what was it that attracted you to the sport?**

*We lived in Mill Valley, California, which is where mountain biking developed early on. I knew a guy, Bob Coates, who was one of the originals in the famous Repack race in 1974, so I had an awareness. But back then I was into running marathons. Then one day my yuppie neighbours, who I just hated (laughs), came home with two brand new Specialized Stump Jumpers; those bikes on the back of their shiny ute looked so cool. About a week later I was flicking through a bike magazine and saw a Shimano add. There was a woman on a road bike and this guy in a bush shirt and boots and jeans on a mountain bike riding up a track toward her. So I decided I had to get one.*

**What did you end up buying?**

*I had a friend who did some frame building and I'm a boat builder by trade, so we decided to make one. We went down to Mill Valley Cycles and they got some tubing from Tom Ritchie, who just lived down the road. They sold me some wheels straight off a brand new Stump Jumper and helped drag together the bits and pieces. The frame geometry we copied out on an article I'd read about the Team Nishiki mountain bikes. But I came home to Christchurch before it was finished, so my first ride on it was toward the end of 1983 up the Rapaki Track. It was a pretty good bike for the time; real race geometry and weighed in less than 30 pounds.*



Keith McLeod  
Karapoti 2005  
On NZ's first  
custom Mtb

**How much did it cost you then?**

*By the time I'd finished it was about US\$1300, which was a hell of a lot back then. When the Stump Jumpers turned up here I think they were only about NZ\$950! (laughs).*

**How many bikes have you had since then?**

*Oh, a couple hundred all up. For years I kept every bike, or knew where it was, but now I just keep the mountain bikes.*

**What was your favourite bike over the years?**

*The thing is, all those old bikes ride like shit. You get on them now and it's scary. But one bike I wouldn't mind back was an early '90s GT that had the very first generation Shimano XTR gear on it. That was a nice bike and it's the only one I haven't still got. About '93 I had a titanium Litespeed with full XTR. It weighed 21 pounds. But the lightest bike was a 1990 KHS Team I had. It was a Tom Ritchie bike that had been re-badged. It rode like a pig, but it was under 20 pounds, which was insane back then. The first shocks I ever had I put on that bike, and it rode even worse. But I almost won the Aussie vets downhill on it one year. Halfway down I had to stop for a crash. Shit I was wild. I had to get off my bike and drag this guy out of the way, and I still got fourth. I was ranting and raving about having another run, but the organisers were just, (Aussie accent) "Oh, that's just how it goes mate." I don't think I ever got over that (laughs).*

**What was the scene like back in those early days?**

*Initially there was just me and Dave Fenton. Then the Stump Jumpers and Shoguns arrived in New Zealand and Healing copied them for their Mountain Cat and we started seeing a few others. We'd all climb into my Hillman station wagon - I hated uphill back then - so we'd pick tracks we could drive up, and then roar down them while someone drove the car back to meet us. In 1985 I decided to organise a race on the Port Hills Stock Route. There were five of us; Dave Fenton, me, my brother and two young guys. One of the kids had a BMX and Dave Fenton turned up with his touring rig wearing a woolly hat and Campag t-shirt. We all had jeans and ugly big helmets and boots. I still have the results somewhere; it's written up on the back of a 1985 Christchurch Marathon entry form and the fastest time was about 4min 05secs for the 2k.*

**But how did that lead to the race scene today?**

*After that we were all hanging out for races and we heard that there was going to be this big event in Wellington, so the five of us drove up and did the first Karapoti. That was early 1986. It was a blast and we came home wanting to organise something in Christchurch. We got turned back by just about every farmer on the Port Hills when Dan and Henry Van Ash offered their farm. So in 1987 we organised the Port Hills Classic. We rigged the course to suit us with a few dead-ends and secret tracks. It was a brutal course and brutally hot, and all along the course there were dead sheep skulls... It was just epic. Not long after that we organised the Stock Route race again and it was huge; we had about 30 starters. We all still had jeans and boots and ugly helmets, but there was some fast riding. Henry Van Ash was the fastest; 1:47 for the 2k, so he was up around 70k/hr. That's still the record because my wife and I went back over to the States for a few years after that and the race was never run again. I wouldn't mind organising it again just to celebrate 25 years.*

**When you went back to the States how did the scene compare to home?**

*Oh it was a lot bigger over there, especially the racing. We lived in Reading in Northern California this time and there were races and clubs popping up all over the place. But it was kind of weird too. The bike shop I went to, the Chain Gang, had a club and I went along to ride and they said, "Oh great to have you along but you can't ride until you're all signed up because if you crash you could sue us." But I joined up and we did some crazy stuff; riding on tracks with fresh bear prints in the dust, and I went to the first worlds in Mammoth in '88. I still have the t-shirt and water bottles somewhere. I'm a hoarder aye. My wife doesn't know, but our roof is full of old bike stuff, results, catalogues, and I have almost all our kids old toys and stuff. I'd never throw any of it away."*

**So you pretty much lived for the mountain bike back then?**

*Yeah I did. After we came back to Christchurch I opened up Chain Gang Cycles, which was named after the shop in Reading. We only sold mountain bikes and only sold bikes over \$500. No kids bikes or even road bikes; just serious mountain bikes. The shop was this nice brick building with wooden floorboards; we just tried to create a cult sort of thing. One year at nationals prize giving just about everyone had a Chain Gang Cycles t-shirt on; it was embarrassing... Hey, you were asking about favourite bikes; while we had Chain Gang I built up a replica of Gary Fisher's 1936 Schwinn; the bike he rode at Repack and stuff in the mid-70s. I built the replica from scratch. Everything was the same and we had it hanging on the wall at Chain Gang. I sold it eventually and it ended up in Rotorua and when Gary Fisher was in New Zealand a couple of years ago he saw it on the wall in this shop. Apparently it blew him away and he made the guy get it down and he signed it for them.*

**You must have seen some big changes over the years.**

*From the shop side, I see a lot of people buy a mountain bike and go to Bottle Lake or somewhere like that and never ride anywhere else. When we started up, we wanted to ride everywhere! Having said that, stuff like downhill and jumps is getting really big now, which I get a kick out of because if I was 18 again that's all I'd want to do. I came from a surf background as a youngster and there was this sort of rebel thing. I think it's the same with these young guys making secret jumps and cutting illegal tracks and stuff. There's this sort of rebel thing going on, but they're out there having fun, getting fit and healthy and mostly staying out of trouble. And it's bloody amazing the stuff they ride.*

**What about you today? Are you still as involved?**

*About 2000 I stopped doing much. I was still working in the bike industry, but just wasn't riding. I put on a bit of weight and stuff. In 2005 I did the 20<sup>th</sup> Karapoti and it nearly killed me. But about 2004 a friend and my brother-in-law both had heart attacks within a few days. I'm 59, so it gave me a bit of a scare, so I've been doing some riding again.*

**I'll bet you're finding things a bit different now?**

*Yeah, I don't really know anyone. But it's nice knowing you had a part in something. You know, a few years ago now, when my boys were in their teens, I took them to watch a race somewhere. While we were there one of them overheard some guy whispering to his young son, "Hey, see that man over there. That's Keith McLeod; he invented mountain biking in Christchurch." That was nice you know, and I think my boy got a kick out of it too."*

1986 - Keith McLeod at centre, lining up for the inaugural Karapoti Classic

