

From Whence We Came

It is common knowledge that the Karapoti Classic kick-started mountain biking here in New Zealand. But how did mountain biking even make it to these shores in the first place?

Mountain biking as we know it originated out of California in the mid-1970s and hit New Zealand shores in the early-1980s. But there is evidence that people had cottoned on to the fat tyre phenomenon as far back as the late 1800s.

In the USA the famed Buffalo Soldiers used customised bicycles rather than horses when travelling cross country for long distances. In New Zealand there is photographic evidence dating to 1886 of cycling excursions on the rough cart tracks between Christchurch and Akaroa.

More recently, in Europe cyclocross racing has been around for more than 50 years and in 1953 noted American cycling aficionado John Finley Scott built a fat-tyred, flat handlebar bike with gears for riding in the forests around his home. At the same time in both England and France there were organised cross-country races on fat-tyred 650-B (26inch) bikes.

All these, however, were isolated cases with nothing much to do with the birth of what eventually became mountain biking. This hails back to a 1974 cyclo cross race in Marin County, California, when a group of riders calling themselves the Morrow Dirt Club arrived from nearby Cupertino riding fat-tyred cruiser bikes with flat handlebars and homemade thumbshift 10-speed gears with drum brakes and motorcycle brake levers.

Also at this cycle-cross event were three local cycling nuts that had been playing around in similar fashion. Charlie Kelly, Gary Fisher and Joe Breeze were accomplished local road and cyclo-cross racers who had also been restoring 1940s single speed cruiser bikes for riding the trails around Marin County. The appearance of others of a similar inclination gave strength to their growing enthusiasm for off road riding and while the Morrow Dirt Club would disappear within a year, the Marin County crew became the movers and shakers behind mountain biking.

By 1976 all three men had been involved in two events that are accepted as the first mountain bike races. In October of that year Charlie Kelly organised a race down a Marin County fire road that plummeted 1300ft in three kilometres. The course was so hard on their hub brakes they had to repack them with grease after every run down the hill, so they dubbed the race "Repack".

The Repack race put mountain biking on the map, but a month earlier a group of 15 hardy Colorado riders had staged a two-day cross country race from Crested Butte over 12'700ft Pearl Pass to Aspen and return. By 1979 both events had enjoyed significant media coverage, with Repack being featured in *Velonews*, *Outside Magazine* and on Californian television, while the Crested Butte Klunker was featured in *Bicycling Magazine* courtesy of Gary Fisher, who was by now an associate editor of what was then the world's biggest bike mag.

Like many mountain bike events, Repack suffered at the hands of local council bureaucracy and disappeared in the mid-1990s. But the since renamed Pearl Pass Tour is now the World's longest running mountain bike race.

During all this Charlie Kelly, Gary Fisher and Joe Breeze were at the forefront of developing specific off road bikes. Inspired by the Cupertino Riders, Fisher added derailleur gears to his classic 1938 Goodrich cruiser. But in 1977 Joe Breeze took it a step further, building a specific frame with a hand-made triple ring chainset that allowed 18 gears. It was the first real mountain bike.

Initially, Joe Breeze built 10 "Breezers" and after winning the Repack race he had no trouble selling the other nine to his buddies for \$US750 each. Breeze was still heavily involved in road riding and as fate would have it was getting a racing tandem made by a noted nearby bike builder Tom Ritchie. Ritchie had also toyed with off road riding and when he saw the Breezer he knew there might be a market for it. Breeze gladly gave Ritchie the specs from his bike and after talking to many riders and doing a lot more off road riding himself, Ritchie designed and built three new off road bikes, one for himself, one for Gary Fisher and one to show around.

By now it was mid-1979. The initial interest in Ritchie's off road frame encouraged him to build nine more, which with Marin being the hot-bed of this off road movement he gave to Gary Fisher to show around. Fisher was so enthralled with the new bike that he immediately asked Charlie Kelly if he wanted to go into business selling Ritchie's new bikes. They did, naming their bike brand "mountain bike"... and all of a sudden this new sport had a name.

Joe Breeze still makes the "Breezer", Charlie Kelly started the first mountain biking magazine and both Tom Ritchie and Gary Fisher started very successful bike companies of their own. But it was only after the Specialized bike brand got hold of these first bikes and used them as the design basis for the first mass-produced mountain bike, the Specialised Stump Jumper, that the sport gained traction. It was 1982 and mountain bikes were now available worldwide.

Here in New Zealand cycling enthusiasts had been toying around with off road riding for years. Cycle tourists are reported to have been biking through areas like the Heaphy Track in the 1970s. But it was Joe Breeze himself who first introduced New Zealanders to the "mountain bike" during a cycle touring trip in 1981. Local enthusiasts were suitably impressed with his "Breezer" and when Specialized brought out the Stump Jumper a small mountain biking clique began springing up.

Initially it was mostly recreational riders and cycle tourists keen to venture further into the wilderness, but within a few years small races began springing up. In 1983 Christchurch's Keith McLeod returned home after several years living in the mountain bike hotbed of Marin County, California and brought with him New Zealand's first custom-made mountain bike, built from tubing he purchased of Tom Ritchie himself.

In 1985 McLeod organised New Zealand's first mountain bike race, a 2k brake burner down the historic Port Hills Stock Route that attracted five entries. A few months later six people turned out for a similar event in Queenstown, then in early 1986 came the event that kick-started New Zealand's mountain bike movement.

Dubbed "The New Zealand Off Road Bicycle Race", just 45 men and three women lined up for what would later become known as the Karapoti Classic. The event was the brainchild of Paul Kennett and his bike-nut brothers Simon and Jonathan went along for the ride, both literally and figuratively. The first winners were Tim Galloway and Anne Butler, who rode a 10-speed touring bike. Galloway beat Simon Kennett by just two seconds, with Kennett recalling racing in a bush shirt and being offered an apple from Galloway's backpack on the last climb.

Karapoti became this new sport's annual gathering. The Kennett's themselves dominated the next two races, with Paul winning in 1987 and Simon breaking Karapoti's magical three-hour barrier for the first time in 1988. But entries showed little growth until 1989 when 124 riders turned out for the scenic but savage 50km around the Akatarawa Ranges. By 1991 it was out to almost 250 starters and by 1993 500 riders were turning out. Then in 1994 the race doubled in size to almost 1000 riders... Mountain biking was no longer a sport; it was now a phenomenon.

The Karapoti Classic was not New Zealand's first mountain bike event, but like the Coast to Coast did for multisport Karapoti was the event that put mountain biking on the map in this country.

In 2010 Karapoti celebrated its 25th anniversary and despite almost every town in New Zealand having a mountain bike club and major mountain bike race of their own, Karapoti is still the race that mountain bikers aspire to. Limited to 1000 starters, it regularly sells out and has had waiting lists of up to 800 people. Today it is the longest-standing mountain bike event in the Southern Hemisphere and as such the only event that has seen the entire progression of mountain biking Down Under.

When the Karapoti Classic was born, mountain biking was a fringe "interest" that sat somewhere in between cycle touring, road cycling and other fringe events such as the Coast to Coast. Today it is a booming sport that like triathlon, helped reform the way people view sport and recreation. Traditional sports such as athletics and road cycling were born from a competitive base hailing back to Olympic-like ideals. Like any activity these sports could be fun, but based on an almost union-like environment where you had to belong to a club and wear a uniform there was a culture of rules and regulations taking precedence over why people wanted to take part. And if you did take part, it was assumed that all you wanted was merely competition.

The fitness boom of the last three decades changed all this. Fitness became fashion and then lifestyle, and from this the new fringe sports such as triathlon and mountain biking gained traction with the masses. These new sports grew not from clubs or the supposed greater good of Olympic competition, but from demand by an increasingly recreational society taking to new challenges for no better reason than it was something they hadn't done before. They didn't care if they won or lost, they just wanted to be involved in something that seemed worth doing.

By the late-1990s 100,000 mountain bikes had been sold in Wellington alone, which essentially meant that every household in the Capital City had one. Internationally, the sport gained Olympic inclusion in 1996 and while many would say that this heralded the end of mountain biking's innocence, at the grass roots level people still take to mountain bikes for the same basic reasons as they always have.

Today, just as in the early beginnings in California, there is more to mountain biking than races. For many it is a great

companion to other sporting pursuits and a great way to explore the back blocks of a great country. For others it's a thrill seeking mission and disciplines such as freestyle, downhill, trials and Enduro are an increasingly popular, almost cult side of the sport that are actually akin to the beginnings back in Marin County.

Today Wellington, Rotorua and Christchurch are the hub of the sport here in New Zealand. In 1997 the Capital City hosted a round of the prestigious UCI Mountain Bike World Cup and in 2006 Rotorua hosted the world championships. But there is great riding to be had in every corner of the country, much of it on purpose built mountain bike parks and trails established by pro-active local bodies and mountain bike clubs. In more recent years many of these areas have turned this into a blossoming mountain biking touring industry aimed at foreign off road enthusiasts.

But to gauge the popularity and impact of the sport here in New Zealand you need look no further than the latest edition of the Kennett brother's book, *Classic New Zealand Mountain Bike Rides*.

This handbook lists hundreds of off road rides around New Zealand, and a glance through all the great riding available in this country is all one needs to reaffirm that mountain biking is here to stay.

Sources: *American Mountain Biking Hall of Fame*. "Ride, the story of NZ Cycling" (Kennett Bros. 2004).