

1986 - NZ's Original Mountain Bike Race

A recollection by Karapoti creator, Paul Kennett.

I organised the 1986 "Karapoti" because I was a mad keen mountain biker desperate to meet other mad keen mountain bikers! I'd bought my bike, a year earlier. It was one of 15 Shogun mountain bikes imported by Healing to test the mountain bike idea. On Friday nights I'd hang out at Bicycle Village in Wellington looking at expensive bike parts and meeting other desperate bike nuts.

On one such night Ashe Rawson, a mechanic at VIC Cycles said, "Someone should organise a race". At the time I thought, "Sure - why don't you do that, Ashe. But eventually I thought, "Bugger it, I'll do it myself."

I was a 20 year old micro-computer programmer and didn't have any cycle racing experience. I'd never been in a bike race in my life. I might have accidentally seen track racing on TV during the Olympics... No idea!

I called it the "New Zealand Off Road Bicycle Race" (The handle "mountain bike" didn't stick till the late-1980's). I hadn't heard of any other national mountain bike events so there was no reason not to make it the national champs. I put a full page add in the national cycling magazine, plus posters in all the Wellington bike shops.

The route was designed to ensure a road rider would not be able to win it. That was the worst thing I could think of - a roadie winning the first national mountain bike race. So initially I selected a course that went from the top of the Akatarawa Road north into the Tararua's through to Otaki Forks. Today it's known as the Waiotauru Valley ride; 45km, grade five, five to 10 hours. Several riders who knew this route complained bitterly that it was dangerously hard and I was

guaranteed to need Search and Rescue on hand to pull injured people out. On a "fun" test ride my friend Patrick Morgan vomited near the end of this ride... It was quite hard.

Somehow sanity prevailed and I changed the route. To simplify matters I kept the same start line at the Akatarawa Road saddle and just shifted the finish line south, to Karapoti Park.

Paul Kennett



This new route joined the current "Classic" route at the top of the Rock Garden. At this point I could have headed east back down Deadwood, but I thought that would be too easy, so we followed what is now the "Classic" route; down the Rock Garden, up the Devil's Staircase, and all the rest that we've come to know and love.

We had 45 riders show up at the start line, from around the country; Auckland, Rotorua, and Christchurch. We also had Dan Maddess from Canada who had experience racing in the US NORBA mountain bike races. He was doing jumps and skids before the start - doing a good job of convincing everyone that he was going to kick some NZ butt. Fortunately for New Zealand mountain biking history, Dan

punctured and didn't have a pump (he was in the lead at the time).

My brother Simon had his usual slow start and became convinced he was coming last. He was so worried he rode to the lead by the top of Dopers, but long time riding mate Tim Galloway passed him on the downhill. Simon rode with dropped "road" handle bars back then. Whilst the rest is - as they say - history, it's interesting to look at the results on the Karapoti website and see how many went on to long careers in the bike business.

Simon, myself and Jonathan continued organising events, writing books, racing and track building. Ashe Rawson (3rd), Dave Benson (38th) and Ross Gilchrist (dnf) became bike distributors. Dave Fenton (5th) and Dean Rainbow (34th) are bike mechanics. Brent Hoy (14th) organised Wellington mountain bike events for many years. Keith MacLeod (29th) Roy Baker (16th), Peter Burke (30th), Derek Rivers (31st), Dave Hollows (32nd) and Neil Newman (40th) worked for many years in bike and outdoor retail.

Finally, one of the many unique aspects of the Karapoti was that it was an event organised by friends and family. With current organiser Michael Jacques that is still true.