

2004 - Aussie Kicked Arse

It was Australia day at the 19th Karapoti Classic as riders from across the Tasman dominated NZ's premier mountain bike event.

Established in 1986, the Giant Bicycles Karapoti Classic remains the longest running and best-known mountain bike event on either side of the Tasman. Based within the rugged splendour of Wellington's Akatarawa Ranges the gruelling 50km course ranks amongst the top 25 such races in the world. That international reputation continued in 2004 with an Australian double.

When Australian Olympic squad member Peter Hatton arrived in Wellington on Friday he wasn't quite sure how he'd go in the Karapoti Classic. Just five days prior the Australian Olympic squad member had failed to finish their national championships due to back problems and having never seen Karapoti's extremely technical 50km course he wasn't expecting anything but a solid race. But Hatton's idea of solid turned out to be a convincing win against a world-class field.

Despite crashing three times and suffering a puncture the Sydney-sider emerged victorious after a four-way battle with Kiwis Chris Burr, Tim Vincent and fellow Aussie Tim Bennett. It was Bennett - who finished fifth in the Australian championship just a week ago - who pushed the 20 year old the hardest. Hatton trailed his fast starting compatriot and defending champion Tim Vincent through the first half of the race. But with a combination of superb technical skills and running ability he made his move on the 2km bike-carry section up 500m high Devils Staircase and then despatched of his challengers on the final downhill.

"Jeez, I don't want to come all the way to New Zealand to get beaten by another Ozzie", said Hatton after holding out Bennett by just 49secs. "It was a great race; the competition was hot all the way then on the last down hill I really nailed it and managed to get away."

Behind the Australians New Zealand number three Chris Burr got the better of his Nelson compatriot Tim Vincent for third in 2hrs 35min 11secs.

Two-time world junior champion Lisa Mathison lived up to her pre-race favouritism, winning ahead of local Wellington hope Robyn Wong despite what the Brisbane rider called, "the hardest race of my life."

"We don't have hills like that at home, they were up and up and up," said the mud-caked 19 year old seconds after she led a world class women's race across the line in 3hrs 01min 09sec.

Like her compatriot Peter Hatton, Mathison made her move on the long grind up Devil's Staircase, a 2km long climb broken up by knee deep bogs and hills so steep and slippery that competitors are forced to carry their bikes. Wong - who recently won the New Zealand series title - had been the early aggressor, with Mathison following just ahead of a world-class line up that included Canadians Emily Miazga and Heather King, Swiss pros Sandy Kunz and Miriam Saugy and Kiwi standouts Sonia Foote (Rotorua) and New Zealand's number one amateur Rosara Joseph (ChCh).

But once over Devil's Staircase none could match the Brisbane "pocket rocket" as the five foot high 19 year old rode away despite a big crash on the final descent to win almost 2min head of Wong. "I really enjoyed it," she said moments after what many consider one of the best rides in Karapoti history. "It was tough but good fun and it was great having so much competition."

On a course badly affected by Wellington's recent flooding both Hatton and Mathison posted amazing times. Organisers were still clearing slips just 12 hours prior to the event and on a day when most competitors rode 10 to 15min slower than normal Hatton was less than 8min adrift of the 1998 course record (2:20.46) set by Kashi Leuchs. Amongst women, only four females have ever broken three hours on the gruelling Karapoti course so Mathison's ride might be considered second only to Kathy Lynch's record setting 1994 ride of 2hrs 49min 42secs.

"On one of the worst years for course conditions and the fact that they'd never seen the course the two winners would be amongst the most impressive performances we've seen at the Karapoti," said event organiser Michael Jacques. "On a better year we may have seen new course records".

But the Karapoti Classic is not just for the elite. Exactly 998 riders of all ages and abilities tested themselves on the 50km through Upper Hutt's gruelling Akatarawa Ranges. Highlights included the winning tandem ride of American visitors Jim and Cathy Hagen-Smit, the return of Upper Hutt doctor Alistair Rhodes who at age 62 continued his reign as the only person to have completed every Karapoti Classic, and the best-dressed award for Wellington Postie John Wadham who rode the race in NZ Post strip complete with postie bike and mail bags.

Next year New Zealand's longest standing mountain bike race celebrates its 20th anniversary, which organisers hope will attract a record field.

Australia's Peter Hatton outclassed NZ's best

