

## Local Finally Wins Karapoti

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An Upper Hutt GP became the first local to win New Zealand's premier mountain race when Kim Hurst took a surprise win ahead of London Olympian Karen Hanlen at the Merida Karapoti Classic.

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Established in 1986, the Merida Karapoti Classic is the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. Based in Upper Hutt's rugged Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, this annual gathering has become the cultural hub of New Zealand mountain biking. American cycling magazine, *Velo News*, once ranked Karapoti among the top 25 mountain bike races in the world and every year the event attracts more international entrants than any other mountain bike race in New Zealand.

This year some 800 riders from 10 countries and all ends of New Zealand lined up in superb weather and a dry track, but the highlight came from Upper Hutt's adopted doctor, Kim Hurst.

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Hurst, originally from Wales, had been second for the past two years at Karapoti. But facing London Olympian, Karen Hanlen, she was the underdog again going into her third Karapoti. Word around mountain biking circles said Hurst was in her best ever form, but Hanlen has been New Zealand's form female in recent years and was fresh off winning the national title in Rotorua during February.

Hurst, however, declared her intentions from the start, sprinting into the lead in Karapoti's famous LeMans style start across the Akatarawa River and then leading into Karapoti Gorge.

Hanlen stayed close, with national reps Samara Sheppard (Wgtn), Sasha Smith and Megan Dimozantos (Roto) also in close attendance. But Hurst pulled away on the first big climb up Deadwood Ridge and by halfway, at the top of the gruelling 3k bike carry up Devil's Staircase, she had almost three minutes in hand.

Hanlen is renown as one of the strongest finishers in the sport and true to form, started closing on the final climb of the race up the 5k long Pram Track. But Hurst managed to find some legs for the final flat 7k back through Karapoti Gorge and held on to claim the coveted Karapoti title by 74 seconds in 2hrs 50min 31secs.

Behind Hanlen, Samara Sheppard claimed third on bike borrowed from Hurst in 3hrs 50secs, exactly four minutes ahead of Sasha Smith and then ultra-distance specialist Megan Dimozantos.

"That was amazing," beamed Hurst at the finish line. "I wasn't really trying to break away. I was just riding as hard as I could and ended up leading."

"But I knew Karen is always so strong in the second half of a race, so I was spent the rest of the day just riding scared expecting her to come past at any minute.

Indeed, Hurst spent the entire race on the edge. She crashed twice, the first time on the notorious Rock Garden, hitting her knee so hard she wondered if she would be able to manage the following 3k of bike carry up Devil's Staircase.

"A couple of times there, when I was really suffering, I honestly thought I was going to end up being second for the third consecutive year," said Hurst. "It was that thought that kept me going."

Hurst's win made her the fourth fastest woman in Karapoti history, but even more importantly the Upper Hutt GP became the first home town winner.

"Winning such an iconic race, and being the first local to do it, is just amazing," she said.

"When I was looking at emigrating to New Zealand I did a Google search for New Zealand mountain biking and one of the first things that popped up was this crazy video footage of a race where riders had to start by running across a river with their bikes on their shoulders and then rode off into a big mountain range with full-on river crossings and huge hills. But when I got here and rode the course I realised that the video didn't do the race justice."

Hurst's (at right) time didn't really do justice to her effort either. To win she had to beat New Zealand's current number one, but her time (and Hanlen's for that matter) on less than fast track conditions was just four minutes outside the race record set by American-based Kiwi Jenny Smith in 2007, a year many pundits believe were the fastest conditions ever.

The men's race played out in complete contrast to the women, with the favourite taking line honours but only after a closely fought race that saw 10 men contending for the lead during the opening hour.

Rotorua's Dirk Peters was always in control of proceedings. But was shadowed by a tight bunch that included defending champion Matt Waghorn (Palm Nth), former Karapoti bridesmaid's Brendon Sharratt (Wgtn) and Gavin McCarthy (UH), Wellington number one Ed Crossling, and a precocious Wellington teenager named Eden Cruise.

Cruise, aged just 13, was causing the high-powered field a few nervous moments during the first half of the race, riding as high as fourth place before Dirk Peters split the race open along Deadwood Ridge.

Only Crossling could stay with Peters past halfway, but the Wellingtonian suffered an unfortunate puncture on the rocky undulations along the 600m high Titi. Crossling would limp home in fourth place but Peters, who had finished second at Karapoti in 2011, went from strength to strength and continued riding away to win in 2hrs 25min 02min.

Whereas experience won the day in the women's race (Hurst and Hanlen are both well into their 30's) youngsters dominated among men with 21 year old Peter's finishing 3min 12secs ahead of his 20 year old Rotorua training partner Sam Shaw. Behind them came a trio of 30-somethings in Sharratt, Crossling and McCarthy, who just managed to hold out 13 year old Eden Cruise.

Cruise became the youngest ever rider to finish among the top 10 of New Zealand's premier mountain bike race. Prior to him Christchurch's current world junior champion Anton Cooper had finished fourth in 2010 aged 15 and then first in 2011 when he defeated Dirk Peter's by three seconds in Karapoti's closest ever finish.

In yet another Karapoti contrast, the event's charity partner ended having less involvement that ever. The Life Flight air ambulance has a wonderful



reputation rescuing lost and injured adventurers, including mountain bikers. A Life Flight helicopter had airlifted injured riders in the last four Karapoti's. But in this year's superb weather the only serious injury was a broken shoulder who later had the pain eased when she was drawn as the winner of a Merida bike in the spot prize draws.

Indeed, Karapoti has a reputation for celebrating riders of all age and ability. Standout performances this year included Rotorua's Garth Weinberg winning the single speed category for the 10<sup>th</sup> time in 11 years.

Further back in the field included Wellington's 57 year old Francis Hoen finishing his 25<sup>th</sup>

consecutive Merida Karapoti Classic. Karapoti Classic creator, Paul Kennett, could be seen riding the 20k introductory distance with his 3 year old son Adam riding behind on a booster seat, while his twin brothers Simon and Jonathan missed the 50k tandem record by just eight seconds in 2hrs 57min 55secs.

The Kennett brothers And Francis Hoen are already Karapoti life members. In 2013 Wayne Hiscock joined them in the exclusive life membership for becoming only the third rider to clock up 15 sub-three hour rides at Karapoti.

Other standout performances this year included course records in Weekend Warrior categories, with Havelock North's Mike Newell fastest among men in 3hrs 03min 38secs while Upper Hutt's own Andrea Reduced the women's record by 19min to 4hrs 41secs.

It was the elder Expert age group categories that shone brightest, with Wellington's Peter Reynolds becoming the first 60 year old to crack the three hour mark, while Palmerston North riders Noel Pollard and Denis Turnball both took more than an hour off the 70-plus category.

Reynolds impressed by taking a minute off his Karapoti PB from 10 years ago with a classy 2hrs 55min 32secs. Pollard, who had held the 60-plus record until two years ago, reduced the 70-plus record to 4hrs 04min 24secs, but 2<sup>nd</sup> placed Turnball also managed to add his name to the Karapoti Hall of Fame.

Rather fittingly Turnball, at age 73, became the eldest finisher in the history of the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike event.



Dirk Peters