

2014 - The Fastest Ever !

Perfect weather, a super-dry course and recent track maintenance made the 2014 Scott Karapoti Classic the fastest ever with race records and personal best times left right and centre.

King Cooper

Is Anton Cooper the best mountain biker New Zealand has ever produced? That's a big call. During the 1990s Kathy Lynch consistently ranked among the top six women in the world. During the 2000s Susy Pryde scored a Commonwealth Games silver medal and Kashi Leuchs was among the world's top dozen. More recently, Rosara Joseph has won Commonwealth silver and along with Karen Hanlen, every rider above has raced at an Olympics except Cooper. But Anton Cooper has done two things that no other Kiwi ever managed - won a world title and two victories at New Zealand's premier mountain bike race before turning 20.

Anton Cooper



Established in 1986, the Scott 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 it among the top 25 mountain bike races in the world.

This year more than 700 riders from 10 countries and all ends of New Zealand took advantage of a dry track and perfect weather conditions that made 2014 the fastest Karapoti ever. In a race full of former champions, race records were required by the eventual winners. So when the dust had settled Canterbury's Anton Cooper and Upper Hutt's own Kim Hurst were the fastest Karapoti winners ever.

Cooper was always the favourite among men, although the 2012 world junior champion was secretly worried about his form coming into Karapoti's brutal 50k. Not that he didn't have an idea of what this race is all about. In 2009, at age 14 year, he became the youngest rider to break Karapoti's coveted three hour barrier. A year later he became the youngest ever to break 2hrs 30min with fourth place. Then in 2011, at age 16, he became the youngest ever winner.

In 2013 Cooper became the fastest ever winner. But just a few days before he wasn't even sure he wanted to ride following a lack lustre summer that saw him beaten at home

for the first time since 2010. But the former world junior champion simply rode away from 2013 and 2012 winners, Dirk Peters (Roto) and Mat Waghorn (Feilding) to smash Clinton Avery's 2007 record by six minutes.

At the finish line Cooper was almost surprised at his winning time of 2hrs 07min 57secs. "I haven't really felt great lately," he said. "I didn't come to Karapoti looking for the record. I just wanted to win, but the conditions were so good and I had good legs. I saw I was on for a fast one so I really started pushing it hard."

Cooper even shrugged off a puncture on the iconic Rock Garden, saying, "That might have cost me a minute or so."

A mark of how good Cooper's Karapoti is seen in previous record holders. Clinton's Avery's 2:14.00 was four minutes faster than Australian Peter Hatton rode in 2006 (2:18.01), which was two minutes faster than Kashi Leuchs in 1998 (2:20.46), which was two minutes faster than four-time winner Jon Hume in 1994 (2:22.08). Prior to race day only Avery, Hatton and 2009 winner Stu Houltham (2:18.59) had ever broken 2hrs 20min. But Cooper has now broken 2:10.

Behind the teenager's triumph, Feilding's Mat Waghorn also beat Avery's old record with 2hrs 13min 25secs. In third place, Rotorua's Carl Jones needed a sprint to hold off Porirua teen sensation Eden Cruise in 2hrs 18min 42secs. This made Waghorn, Jones and Cruise the second, sixth and seventh fastest riders in Karapoti history, with 14 year old Cruise riding faster than Anton Cooper at the same age.

Upper Hutt's Own

While super-talented youngsters dominated the men's race, a former teen sensation turned super-vet took out the women's title for the second consecutive year.

Kim Hurst, originally from Wales, was a surprise winner in 2013 ahead of London Olympian Karen Hanlen. That win gave the local Upper Hutt doctor a new-found confidence and she returned to Karapoti in hunt of the race record.

Kim Hurst



The 36 year old declared her intentions from the start, hitting the front in the first 100 metres and riding a catch-me-if-you-can tactic that saw the 36-year old racing more against the clock than her competition.

The record pace didn't come easy. "On the last climb up the Pram Track, it was just so hard," Hurst would say after winning in a race record 2hrs 45min 29secs.

"But in the last bit I had some guys around me really pushing me and yelling at me about the record; it was really cool."

Hurst broke Jennifer Smith's 2007 record by two minutes six seconds. Behind her Rotorua's Katie O'Neill and Palmerston North's Margaret Leyland became only the 15th and 16th women to join Karapoti's sub-3 Club with 2:57.08 and 2:59.41 respectively.

Hurst was clearly emotional about the record breaking win. After representing Great Britain as a teenager she gave up the sport for more than a decade before taking it up again when she moved to New Zealand.

"I moved to New Zealand five years ago and I've ridden Karapoti five times. I love this race," said Hurst, who will receive Kiwi citizenship this year.

"When I won it last year I immediately set myself the goal of the race record. So to achieve something that you've worked towards for 12 months, and to have your name in the Hall of Fame next to legends like Jenny Smith and Kathy Lynch is pretty emotional for me."

As the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race, Karapoti is so much more than just a race for line honours. In 29 years it has developed a culture as the sport's annual gathering. In 2014 the event's creators back in 1986 - the Kennett brothers Paul, Simon and Jonathan - were all

riding again. As were locals Francis Hoen and Peter Schmitz, who both finished their 25th Karapoti.

In fourth place among women, Lower Hutt's Jill Westenra continued to reset society's age barriers with 3hrs 08min 21secs at just a few months shy of 50. Meanwhile one of the youngest women, 21 year old Aucklander Nicola Kirkham, became the first woman to race single speed at Karapoti with 4hrs 24min 27secs.

Cycling's cult categories are a big deal at Karapoti and cyclo-cross standout Gary Hall was the biggest deal of them all with a staggering 2hrs 34min 37secs on a cross bike for the 11th fastest time overall. Uni-cycle's are Karapoti's cult'ist of categories, but imagine for a moment the sight of two men sprinting for victory after 50k on a uni-cycle. It was both comical and impressive as New Zealand's Mr Uni-cycle, Ken Looi, held out Upper Hutt's own Tim Armstrong by three seconds to keep his unbeaten Karapoti streak alive.

The biggest cheer, however, was reserved for a young Wellingtonian by the name of Ben Mitchell. At 4hrs 41min 51secs, he didn't feature on any podiums. But he was the hero of the day because at just nine years old Ben Mitchell became the youngest ever finisher of New Zealand's oldest race.

"People like Ben Mitchell and Peter Schmitz are what the Scott Karapoti Classic is really about," said race director Michael Jacques. "Riders of all age and ability and walks of life making Karapoti their own personal challenge."

In 2015 the Scott Karapoti Classic will celebrate its 30th year. "It'll be a big gig," says Jacques. "Because if Karapoti is turning 30 then so is New Zealand mountain biking." Race day is scheduled for Saturday 7 March. See www.karapoti.co.nz for details and 2014 results.

Ben Mitchell on his way to being the youngest ever 50k finisher

