

30th Anniversary Redefines the Age Debate

More than 800 riders from 10 countries took on the 30th anniversary the Karapoti Classic this weekend, with the winners of New Zealand's longest running mountain bike event reigniting sport's oldest debate.

Established in 1986, the Karapoti Classic is thought to be the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race. Based in Upper Hutt's Akatarawa Ranges, approximately 40k north of Wellington, it was the race that kick-started mountain biking Downunder and the challenging route remains largely unchanged today.

Very much an old-school adventure ride, the Karapoti Classic revolves around an uncompromising, some might say cruel, 50km of 4WD trails, single track, wheel sucking sludge, river crossings and wall to wall wilderness. Iconic elements of the course are named to tease and entice.

The first and steepest climb is cruelly called "The Warm Up." The second climb is dubbed "Deadwood" because that's what your legs feel like at the top. The "Rock Garden", "Devil's Staircase" and "Big Ring Boulevard" speak for themselves, while the last climb is called "Pram Track" because riders often end up pushing their bikes.



The Kirkham family started Karapoti as volunteers & progressed to the podium.



Eden Cruise defied his 15 years



It was fitting, then, that at the 30th anniversary of New Zealand's oldest mountain bike race the winners did nothing more than reignite sport's oldest argument - youth vs experience. Because when the dust had settled and the awards been won the men's race had the youngest ever winner while the women's winner was the eldest ever.

With the defending champion, record holder and local Upper Hutt rider, Kim Hurst, facing the former record holder in American-based West Coaster, Jenny Smith, the women's race had been billed as the feature event of this year's Karapoti Classic.

Neither came into the race with ideal preparation. After fractured her wrist in January, Hurst's training had been limited to stationary cycling in her garage and just a couple of mountain bike sessions in the week prior to the race. Smith - who lives in Gunnison, Colorado - came from a winter limited mostly to cross-country skiing and just two and a half weeks of crash-training on the bike while visiting family on the South Island's West Coast. They also had to watch for steady improvers such as Marg Leyland and Sasha Smith, who had been third and fifth in last year's Karapoti Classic.

Both favourites were tentative in the opening 10k, but Jenny Smith admitted to being pleasantly surprised to find good legs on the opening climb up Deadwood Ridge. "From there I just started pushing pretty hard."

Smith was pleased with her second win in Karapoti (her first having been the 2007 record race). But noticeably surprised at her winning time of 2hrs 47min 49secs, which was just 14secs slower than her record breaking win eight years ago.

"Because I wasn't really sure of my form I didn't really pay much attention to my time during the race. But after that last hill looked at the time and thought for a moment, 'maybe if I really push it.' But at the same time I sort of knew it was too late to think about records and I was more than happy with the win."

Peter Schmidt finished his 26th consecutive Karapoti



The 42 year old former runner crossed the line almost seven minutes clear of Hurst in second place. And while the 2014 and 2014 winner took some satisfaction in retaining her race record, she was even more pleased with a strong second place off limited training and a race spent trying to avoid further injury to the not yet fully healed fracture.

In third place Wellington's Sasha Smith enjoyed the race of her life to claim third place in 2hrs 57min 37secs. Behind her Roxburgh's Kath Kelly claimed fourth ahead of Kapiti's Marg Leyland.

In the absence of 2014 winner and Commonwealth Games champion, Anton Cooper, the men's favourite for the 30th anniversary Karapoti Classic was 2012 winner Matt Waghorn (Feilding). But it was Porirua's Eden Cruise who illustrated that at just 15 years of age he already has the tactical nous of a rider with more years in the saddle.

"Last year," explained Cruise after his surprise win, "I led early

on and everyone just sat behind me and then rode away on the first hill. So this year I decided to sit back and let other riders fight out the early stuff.

And they were fighting it out, with the lead changing several times in the opening kilometres before Cruise and Wellington's Ed Crossling emerged at the front. At the top of the last climb, Cruise was second but gaining ground on the former road stand-out. Then Crossling, perhaps pushing the envelope just a tad too hard, suffered a puncture.

Cruise wasted no time in capitalising on the 28 year old's misfortune, eventually crossing the line 45secs clear of fast-finishing Wellingtonian Tom Bradshaw in 2hrs 28min 01secs. Mathew Waghorn managed to salvage a solid third to now own first, second and third placings at Karapoti, while Ed Crossling was no doubt thinking of what might have been after finishing eighth.

Eden Cruise, however, must surely be thinking now of what might lay ahead. Only six years ago he made

headlines as Karapoti's youngest ever finisher when he rode the full 50k race with his father at age nine. In the last two years he has ridden faster at Karapoti than Anton Cooper did at the same age and has now won the prestigious title a year younger than Cooper was when he won the 2011 race.

At the opposite end of the age spectrum, Wellington's Peter Schmitz was a popular winner. The 70 year won his age category for riders over age 70, but got his biggest cheer for completing his 26th consecutive Karapoti classic to become the rider with the most finishes at New Zealand's longest running mountain bike event.

Other popular finishers were Paul and Simon Kennett. It was Paul who created the Karapoti Classic back in 1986. In 1987 he won his own race and in 1988 his brother Simon won it. In 2015 they rode tandems with their children.

The 31st Karapoti Classic is scheduled for Saturday 5th March. Visit www.karapoti.co.nz for more information and full results from 2015's 30th anniversary race.

Jenny Smith ripping it up at 42

