

## Another Record-Breaking Year

In 2019 the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic continued its renown as the Southern Hemisphere's longest running mountain bike race. And the winners continued their reign as the sports fastest couple.

In 2017, Samara Sheppard and Kyle Ward made history as the first couple to win the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic. In 2019 they repeated that feat. Ward opened proceedings with the second fastest time ever recorded at Karapoti but was soon overshadowed when Sheppard put up perhaps the best ride by a female mountain biker this country has ever seen.

Certainly, it was the best ride by anyone in Karapoti Classic history. Much had been made pre-race of the rematch between Sheppard and four-time winner and record holder, Kim Hurst. In 2017 Sheppard had been a surprise winner ahead of Hurst and missed the race record by just 33secs, only to have Hurst tumble her in 2018 when Sheppard was unable to fix a puncture fast enough.

This year's rematch was made even more interesting with the entry of former world mountain running champion-turned Olympic triathlete-turned top-class road cyclist-turned occasional mountain biker, Kate McIlroy. But in the end Sheppard made the race her own.

Established in 1986, the Bluebridge Karapoti Classic is thought to be the longest running mountain bike race in the Southern Hemisphere. Based in Upper Hutt's rugged Akatarawa Ranges near Wellington, the course is an old-school adventure ride featuring huge hills and river crossings amid remote, rugged and historic forest trails.

It was at the 2007 Karapoti Classic that Samara Sheppard tasted her first major success as a mountain biker, setting a junior record of 3hrs 04min 13secs that still stands today. In 2019, however, she rode a race record that may well stand the test of time.

In a race that was billed as an exciting three-way affair, the 27-year old's only competition was the clock. After missing Hurst's record by just 30secs on a wet year in

2017, Sheppard had thought 2hrs 35min would be possible. But perfect weather, perfect course conditions and perfect form combined to see history made on the rugged 50k tour of the Akatarawa Ranges.

When Sheppard stopped the clock at 2hrs 29min 13secs, everyone took a double take at the clock. She had finished eighth fastest overall, in a time that is good enough to have placed among the top three men as recently as 2015. Second placed Kate McIlroy's time of 2hrs 36min 42secs also broke Hurst previous record but saw her trailing seven minutes in arrears. Local Upper Hutt ever-green, Kim Hurst, filled third in 2hrs 57min 19secs at age 40.

Indeed, in any other year, Sheppard's partner, Kyle Ward, would have taken centre stage. After winning in 2017 and finishing second in 2018, he dominated the race for line honours in 2019 to win by five minutes in 2hr 08min 35secs. Only former world and Commonwealth champion, Anton Cooper, has ridden faster with his 2014 record ride of 2hrs 07min 57secs.

Behind Ward, Rotorua's San Shaw claimed second in 2hrs 13min 13secs (the fourth fastest Karapoti ever), while Wanganui's Brendon Sharratt claimed third place for the third time in 2hrs 18min 26secs.

More than 600 riders from 10 countries took on the race that kick-started mountain biking Downunder. There were other record setters too, such as Warkworth's 77-year-old John Winkie becoming Karapoti's eldest ever finisher, while at the other end of the age scale Wellington nine-year-old Kuba Solc became the youngest ever.

In 2020 the Karapoti Classic will celebrate its 35th year by racing for the first time on Leap Day.

Full results at [www.karapoti.co.nz/history](http://www.karapoti.co.nz/history).

