

World Champions Win NZ's Oldest Mountain Bike Race

Two former world champions from two different sports and two different generations claimed victory in the 35th anniversary of New Zealand's longest running mountain bike event.

Established in 1986, the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is, in fact, 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 almost 700 riders from eight countries and all ends of New Zealand gathered for the 35th anniversary, with the highlight being the appearance of New Zealand number one Anton Cooper.

Cooper was always the favourite among men. At just 25 years of age the much-celebrated Cantabrian has two world titles and Commonwealth gold and silver to his palmares. Not to mention a celebrated pedigree in New Zealand's best-known mountain bike event.



As a talented 14-year-old spotted by Christchurch mountain bike enthusiasts, the Karapoti Classic was the first major mountain bike race Cooper rode. A year later he became the youngest ever to finish in the top-5 and the year after that (2011) he became the youngest ever winner. World junior titles followed, then in 2014 Cooper set a record of 2hrs 07min 57secs that still stands today.

In fact, Cooper's record still stands even after his win at this year's 35th anniversary. He did indeed return to the Akatarawa's looking to break his own record. But while the weather was perfect during the race, heavy overnight rain that stopped only as the race lined up left the course wet and river crossings high, so Cooper had to be satisfied simply with a massive seven-minute winning margin.

Despite the wet course, the pace was furious from the start with Nelson teenager Cameron Jones and 2019 runner-up Sam Shaw from Rotorua forcing the pace after leading out of Karapoti's famous LeMans-style start across the Akatarawa River. Cooper took over on the first big climb up Deadwood Ridge, but

only opened up a handful of seconds. But the effort had taken its toll on Jones and Shae, while Cooper was able to push on along the ridge-top, down the Rock Garden and up Devils Staircase, down Big Ring Boulevard and over Dopers Hill to eventually win by almost seven minutes in 2hrs 15min 51secs.

While almost eight minutes away from his record, a mark of how good Cooper's ride really was is seen in his win being some nine minutes faster than any previous wet winner. Behind him, the 19-year-old Jones claimed second in 2hrs 22min 24secs, three minutes clear of Shaw.

While super-talented youngsters dominated the men's race, a former world champion runner-turned Olympic triathlete-turned cyclist and mountain biker, dominated the women's race. A year ago Kate McIlroy claimed second in the second fastest time ever to the record-smashing win of Samara Sheppard (2hrs 29min 13secs). This year the 38-year-old Wellingtonian used her experience and strength to claim victory ahead of plucky teenager, Sammie Maxwell. McIlroy's win in 2hrs 47min 32secs was perhaps the fastest ever wet woman's win at Karapoti, while Maxwell smashed the junior record set by Sheppard in 2007 with 2hrs 53min 32secs to claim second ahead of Australian Karen Hill.

Further back in the field in this 35th anniversary Karapoti Classic Upper Doctor, Alistair Rhodes, made an impact as the only rider to have also raced in the inaugural 1986 race. The 78-year old's participation was testament to how far mountain biking has come in three and half decades, because in both 1986 and 2020 he was the eldest finisher!

"As amazing as the champions are," said event manager Michael Jacques, "people like Alister Rhodes are what the Gazley Skoda Karapoti Classic is really about. "Sports like mountain biking are about all age and ability achieving challenges they might not otherwise have to chance to take on."



See www.karapoti.co.nz for details and 2020 results.