

In the first weekend of March every year, Australasian mountain biking looks to a valley tucked deep within the hills behind New Zealand's capital city. For 13 years Wellington's Akatarawa Valley has hosted the Karapoti Classic, a rugged single loop race that is rapidly gaining cult status to the extent that American magazine VeloNews list it as one of the top 25 races in the world. What goes on there has become the stuff of legend.

March 1, 1998 dawned foreboding. Grey clouds skulked about the steep forested hills above the Akatarawa Valley. But the threatening rain failed to arrive and there was a palpable sense of relief that the course would be dry. The Karapoti Classic makes everyone nervous, even those loyal followers who were riding it for their second, third, fifth, or in the case of local enthusiast Alastair Rhodes, the 12th time. The thing is, once you start Karapoti you're really out there, in the wilderness, on your own, for 50km of nasty drop offs in the Rock Garden, greasy bogs on the Devil's Staircase, cold slippery river crossings, and of course the three legendary climbs: Deadwood, Titi and Dopers.

The Akatarawa River collects water from deep in the hills and at Karapoti Park it flows fast and cold over a slippery riverbed. Riders were called to the start line dead on time, lining up on the east side of the river, the elite amongst them jostle for the best spot. The countdown began; riders raised their bikes to their shoulders and found their balance on the uneven river's edge. For a second it is perfectly still, then the gun and suddenly the river erupts in a spasm of flailing knees and writhing bikes as riders sprint for the other side.

The course may be dry, but in the chaos of the river crossing some riders start the race fully soaked. Across the river, they raced up the muddy bank, clogging their cleats nice and early, dropped their bikes to the ground and vanished into the rugged ranges not to be seen again for three, four, five, even six hours. Up on the bridge a crowd numbering in the thousands goes wild... this is what they came to see.

So began the 13th Karapoti Classic, the largest mountain bike race in Australasia, and by far the most popular. Created by the Kennett Brothers, Paul, Simon and Jonathon, their race has developed such that every year they are forced to turn away hundreds of entries. Intent on providing a quality event while minimising the effect on the environment, 1000 riders, they say, is enough.

The Kennett's are well known as pioneers of the New Zealand mountain biking scene. Paul conceived of the event in the mid-1980s when mountain bike racing was virtually unknown and according to Simon, "Mountain bikers were still thought of as big kids on BMXs." Paul's concept was to design a race that no one on skinny tyred racing bike could win. A

strong technical rider, the course he created clearly reflects his passion for single-track trickiness.

The inaugural Karapoti was held in 1986. Simon recalls: "It seemed like such a big thing... 45 riders seemed like a lot, and they were from all over the country." Doubters said the course was too hard, but those who rode it raved about it and numbers have sky rocketed ever since.

Foreign superstars like Susan deMattei, Leigh Donovan and Dave Weins heard about it and came to test their mettle. In 1993 the number of riders doubled from 450 to 900 and in 1995 the Kennetts decided enough was enough and limited entries to 1000. The brothers take turns annually to ride in the race: it means they can keep a finger on the pulse and it's also a reward for the months of work put in to organising the event.

Why do riders keep returning year after year to ride the same gruelling course? Why do foreign riders forsake Slick Rock for the South Pacific? It is hard to pin down, but one thing is plainly evident: Karapoti has become more than the sum of its parts. It's a whole day out: there's a festival atmosphere, the twisted good vibe of shared trauma combining with an event expo and an array of activities for riders and supporters with any energy left to spare.

If the 50km wasn't enough to finish you off, post-race at Karapoti you can try your hand at blindfold bike slalom, a trails course, or even a clean ascent and dismount of the picnic table.

Gwilym Griffith-Jones was riding Karapoti for the fourth time. He races the national series but remains committed to Karapoti despite it falling during the middle of the series: "I love this race. It still has the sense of journey that is lacking in multi-lap races and even when you're going your hardest it's still a totally fun adventure."

One thousand riders return to Karapoti every year for the same reason. At Karapoti says Simon Kennett, "there's a shared sense of achievement."

Watching from the finish line, riders returned throughout the day, some of them after six hours. Regardless of how long it took them, however, everyone is uniformly plastered in mud and their eyes gleamed out of encrusted faces with a crazed, obsessive sort of look - the look of the converted.

The race finishes at Karapoti Park, where you'll find 1000 riders in various states of dishevelment collapsed under the sun amidst a festival of families, supporters and spectators numbering in the thousands. It was kind of like being at a rock concert, only dirtier.

The prizes, too, celebrated participation as well as speed. Kiwi wunderkind Kashi Leuchs won a trip to the world champs for his course record breaking win, but there were also hard fought battles for off-beat awards like the Best Dressed Rider, the Retro Award for the first person home without shocks or clipless pedals, and the Clydesdale category for the first rider home who, with their bike, weighed in at over 110kg. The winner topped 120!

But when the dust has settled no one takes on Karapoti for the prize pool. They enter it to be part of one of the truly unique races in the world, to experience the rugged and individualistic New Zealand style of adventure sports. They enter to become part of the legend that is Karapoti.

Kashi Leuchs set a course record

