

Surviving Karapoti

Simon Kennett is one of the founding organisers of the Karapoti Classic, winning in 1988 and never finishing outside the top 20 since.

A couple of years ago I wrote an article called Training for a Karapoti Personal best. It involved thousands of kilometres of riding over a three-month period with the expectation that the rider in question would finish in less than three hours.

This article is for your average rider, the weekend warrior who just wants to get round the course in one piece and be able to brag, "I finished the Karapoti Classic". If you're a bit below peak fitness, ride a bike the pro's wouldn't be seen dead on, or have legs as hairy as a Yeti's, read on - here are some top tips for surviving Karapoti in style.

Before the Big Day

If you've got the time, squeeze a bit of extra riding in. Try to do a couple of long rides (3-4 hours) in the weekends before D-day. And, during the week, pop in a couple of short hard rides (an hour is fine). Ideally these last minutes rides will be on terrain similar to Karapoti: big, steep, rocky climbs and descents. If that's not an option, a fast commute home, or a half hour run twice a week will do wonders. Make sure you are comfortable carrying or pushing your trusty steed - really sturdy shoes are a bonus.

Get plenty of rest and sleep, and stretch your legs and back, especially if you're doing a bit more riding than normal. Eat plenty of complex carbohydrates in the last couple of days before the race and maybe shout yourself a massage.

Make sure your bike is in tip-top condition. Chuck on some new brake pads and tyres (nice big chunky ones pumped up to around 35psi). Give it a clean and lube the chain. Get a bike shop to give it a once over, then take it for a spin to check it's all honky-doory. If you're not taking a Camelbak, make sure you can carry two water bottles and then check that you can still carry your bike.

Slap together a tool kit with at least a spare tube (with the right valve), patch kit, tyre levers and a pump. You really should also take a good mountain bike specific multi-tool that includes allen keys and chain tool... And, it's a good idea to work out how to use all that stuff BEFORE the race.

On the Day

Get up nice and early and have a good size breakfast of carbohydrates 3 hours before the start. Sort out a couple of litres of drink and a couple of bananas for during the race. I use a well-diluted sports drink and, for a boost on the last hill, some diluted flat coke. I find squeezies are far too concentrated and don't sit well in the stomach. Load your gear into the car and double check you have everything - you wouldn't be the first to forget your helmet or a wheel. Try to get to Karapoti Park well before 9am.

Once you've been through registration and put your number on your bike, head down the road for a bit of a warm up and some stretching. Be back at the park for the race briefing at 9:30 am. If yours is one of the later starts you could do your warm up after the briefing. Then head for the loo's - a good 'nervous one' is worth its weight in titanium. Having to hold on for half the race is a bad scene.

Be at the start line a few minutes early and chill out. The start is not important in the scheme of things. Just hang near



the back, spin up the Gorge and conserve energy for the hills. There's a 12:30pm cut-off at the top of Deadwood. Forget about the riders around you and focus on the cut-off.

At the top of Deadwood you start an undulating section with a lot of short up's and down's. It's hard work through this section, but use your gears to keep the legs ticking and remember that you're heading for some sweet downhill soon.

Try to remember to drink a little every 15 minutes. This will help keep your energy levels up, reduce the chances of dehydration and may ward off the dreaded cramp. At the top of the Devil's Staircase grab a cup to drink at the drinks station and eat a banana. This is a good spot for a short break, but not so long that you cool down completely (5 minutes maximum). If you feel knackered now, eat your second banana too. Dopers, the last big hill, is still to come and while it's not as steep as the previous two it is still huge. You'll need some reserves to make the most of it; so taking the banana now will give it time to get through the system for Dopers.

During the second half of the race tired riders start to lose concentration, resulting in punctures or crashes. Stay focused be cautious. If it's wet your brakes might be wearing out and your vision impaired by mud. The final downhill off Dopers is an important time to 'Ride to Survive' as the slogan goes.

Once you reach the top of the Gorge you still have 8k to go, but no major obstacles. But a few riders have come unstuck here. Watch out for slippery bridges and slips on the track. Then, as you approach the finish don't forget to bask in your glory, just a little at least. After all, the Karapoti Classic is one of the toughest races in the mountain biking world.

Summary

We get a few 'DNF's at Karapoti each year, mainly bike failure and injury. If you check your bike thoroughly beforehand, carry a decent tool and learn basic repairs, bike failure is unlikely to stop you from finishing. If you pace yourself well and ride the descents within your ability, injury is also unlikely. With a bit of training, some basic bike prep and a 'can do' attitude, you won't just be surviving Karapoti. You can be finishing with a smile on your dial.
