



# Horse tale has a happy end

**A rough ride in her twenties set Fiona Johnson's rodeo dreams in motion, writes Johanna Leggatt**

**T**HERE was a point in Fiona Johnson's mid-20s when her future narrowed to a set of very bleak statistics.

If she chose to continue as usual, there was only a 50 per cent chance she would remain cancer-free for the next five years, but if she went ahead with a risky bone-marrow transplant there was a 30 per cent chance she could die, and a 10 per cent chance of complications that could lead to her becoming an invalid.

That was 11 years ago, and a very healthy and fit Fiona is blissfully still free of the acute myeloid leukaemia she fought off, and feels vindicated by her decision not to risk a transplant.

"It's been a time of extreme highs and lows," says Fiona from her home in Murwillumbah in northern NSW.

"My husband, Matt, jokes that life is never boring with me."

Like many who battle a life-threatening illness, Fiona emerged from her experience a changed woman with a hardened resolve to "not waste a moment".

In Fiona's case this translated into pursuing her love for the rodeo circuit, more specifically, competing at calf roping and barrel racing events across the country.

She has always loved horses — she bought her first saddle off her own back when she was 10 — but wonders whether she would have taken that extra step and entered rodeo competitions had it not been for her illness.

"I would like to think that I would have, but it's hard to say," says the 36-year-old, who has just written a book *My Wild Ride* about her extraordinary decade.

"But before I got sick Matt and I both were working full-time and we had pretty good jobs and we were paying off our mortgage.

"It isn't a bad thing at all to be like that, but we were in our routine and maybe I would never have gone outside my comfort

zone as much had this not happened."

Whatever motivated Fiona to sign up for the rodeo championship circuit, she has clearly got a knack for it.

She is a three-time National Rodeo Association finalist, she won the Rookie Champion Breakaway Roping competition in 2005, and has a personal best in breakaway roping — where the mounted rider snares a calf — of 2.29 seconds.

She is also a qualified riding instructor, mother of two small children, and a professional horse trainer.

"There is something quite electric about the rodeo circuit," she says.

"It's like being at a nightclub, but there are families there.

"The music is really loud and the atmosphere is incredible.

And as much as the past decade has been a struggle for her, Fiona also considers herself blessed on many fronts.

She married the "love of her life", lives in an especially pretty pocket of northern NSW and has, miraculously, given birth to two children, Mahli and Beau.

"I was told the chances of giving birth were pretty slim after what I had been through," she says.

Indeed, when Fiona began experiencing hot sweats and nausea she put it down to the early onset of menopause, which was common in women with her kind of cancer.

"But then I went to the supermarket and bought a pregnancy test on a whim," she says.

"I am such a dreamer, and I figured that if really bad things can happen to you then wonderful things can, too, and I was right. I was pregnant." As for the future, Fiona and Matt have discussed some travel, and one thing is for certain: they won't be waiting "for the right time" to take off and see the world.

"People say I love the Gold Coast and I want to retire there, but my advice is to do it now," she says.

"Don't wait 10 years to do the thing you love.

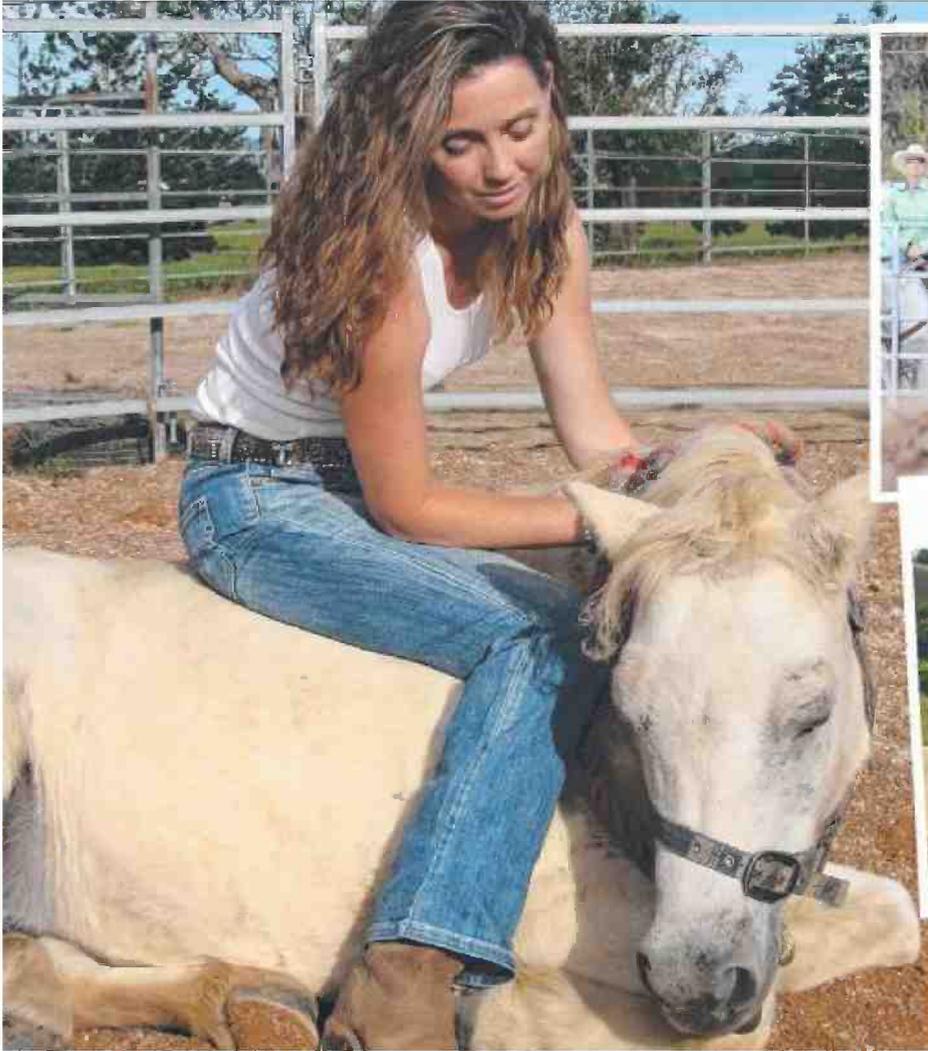
"You may not have that long."

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**My Wild Ride by Fiona Johnson,  
Allen & Unwin, \$29.99;  
Visit [fionajohnson.com.au](http://fionajohnson.com.au)**





**Unbridled passion:** Fiona Johnson (left) teaches her horse Cappucion to lie down, and (above) Fiona at a calf-roping event.