

# At home on the range

## Texan marries her Crocodile Dundee and settles for a love affair with the Pilbara

When Texan-born Robin Pensini's friends ask if she has met Crocodile Dundee in her now 21-year stopover in Australia, she gives an emphatic response.

Steve Butler



"I married him," Robin says of her real-life WA outback love story. "I don't know that I ever dreamed of marrying an outback Australian pastoralist."

Evan Pensini greets visitors to his family's Cheela Plains property, about 130km west of Tom Price, with a broad smile only marginally contained by his wide-brimmed hat. It shines with the delights of his rugged, but picturesque backyard playground of nearly four decades, while belaying the adversity which almost rendered the property untenable just five years ago.

And the story behind the hunt for the woman of his dreams is the stuff movies are made from. Despite her background as a champion US rodeo rider in her youth, Robin was an unlikely student work experience visitor from her family's Fairfield ranch to Cheela Plains in 1991.

She clearly understates her memory of the visit to the drought-stricken property when she recalls it as an "eye-opener". "It was just an alcoholic trip for the students to go north for the winter for a few weeks," Evan jokes.

"She came up on the bus with all these drunk students, she didn't know what was

happening. Three days in Australia, she was shoved on a coaster bus and had gone 1500km."

Robin soon returned home to work with the Texas Beef Council, but a chord between the two had been struck. Evan pondered what had taken him about the young American woman for two years before taking his first overseas trip on a whim that he might be able to tempt her back home.

"I thought maybe before someone snapped her up, I'd better go chase her down and just see if she was still keen to do something," he said. A proposal was made and accepted and in a "jaw-dropping" moment at dinner with Robin's family, the whirlwind romance and plans for her life Down Under were revealed.

That was in March 1994. By June, Robin had followed him back to Cheela Plains and by October they were married in Kings Park. As Evan, a passionate West Coast fan, is at pains to stress, it was shortly after the Eagles had secured their second premiership. "She's been fantastic, she's followed me through everything and supported me the whole way," Evan said. "I couldn't have asked for a better wife to do it with."

But, typically with life in the outback, the journey has not always been a Hollywood fairytale. At the point of ruin in 2010 because of the region's arid conditions, the Pilbara property bought by Evan's father in 1976 was destocked and the family headed for Alice Springs to manage a station property while they pondered walking away from their life's work.

They even started the process of putting their 200,000ha property on the market. "It was a big turning point in our lives, both personally and financially," Evan said.



Happy family: Evan and Robin Pensini and their son

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Evan Pensini

"It's a harrowing time for any livestock producer to sell every animal they have ever bred and looked after. To sell them is pretty traumatic, but it's also pretty traumatic to go through extended drought and see livestock deteriorate. We'd been through that before and didn't want to do that again."

"We thought it would be better for the land and better for the livestock if we didn't let them get that bad and looked at the more visionary approach of letting that country repair itself without having the livestock still basically eating it down to nothing. You have a lot of sleepless nights."

"But once the stock had gone and the stress, to a certain degree, had come off us, we could actually look at our business from arm's length at a distance and see some missed opportunities."

The Pensinis, anxious for their younger two sons Lawson and Preston to enjoy the same formative life on the land as their elder twin brothers Fraser and Gavin, decided to return and have successfully diversified their business into contracting, agistment and tourism.

In the time they spent away from their land, it was washed with only 120mm of rain. In stark contrast, they have recorded more than 200mm on their property in the past two months.

Robin tears up as she relives the success of her School of the Air ride with all four sons, 10-year-old Preston the last sibling continuing study from home. At the other end of the age range, Fraser was last year



Battling on: Evan Pensini at Cheela Plains Station. Pictures: Iain Gillespie

awarded Guildford Grammar's dux prize and both he and Gavin knocked back Harvard rowing scholarships to stay home to study at the University of WA.

"They've been with us every step of the way and they've just grown with us," an emotional Robin said.

"They've seen us work really hard and they've seen the joys and the hardship. It still brings tears to my eyes... but it's the work ethic and the discipline and understanding that nothing comes easy. Keeping them close to nature is a good thing, too."

Now living in their house made of sea containers and with floors made from local rock, the Pensinis have 1000 head of cattle on agistment and are planning to reinvest back into their own stock. But the threat of their pastoral lease one day being mined for its rich veins of iron ore sits uncomfortably with Evan, who fears for the future of the spectacular gorges, pools and plains.

"You have a real connection to the land, especially when you grow up with it through those younger years," he said.



"Then you get a lot more respect for it when you start working with it. So I find it disappointing there is almost like a Pilbara-type mentality of 'We'll dig it out now' and there seems to be no post-mining future that anyone has really seriously thought about."

"If a lot of these areas physically get mined, or the mines get close to them and possibly destroy places, I think that's pretty sad."

"We should be looking at utilising these resources so we

don't have to keep relying on the finite resources of the minerals. We have to make sure there's a life for the Pilbara after mining."

Mr Pensini did not rule out moving on from the land they love after Preston followed the path of his three older brothers into boarding school. But he still hopes that one of them, one day, will head back to Cheela Plains to continue the family dream.

"It's pretty hard to get this out of your blood," he said.