



# MODEL example

Bikini babe turned  
business entrepreneur  
Jodhi Mears is  
no wilting tigerlily,  
despite her recent  
battle on the box

**STORY** MELISSA FIELD

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**J**odhi Meares takes a sip of her soy latte before announcing, "I'm not Bert Newton." Smiling, she adds, "I'm not Patti, either," then gives a surprisingly deep guffaw for someone so petite. She's referring to her limitations as a live TV presenter and her decision not to return as host of Foxtel's *Australia's Next Top Model*, following her stage-fright induced no-show at the live finale of season four in July.

"Fronting a live broadcast is really difficult," she says earnestly. "Entertainers work for years learning how to handle big audiences and I knew I couldn't agree to front a finale on the scale Foxtel wanted. I had to say, 'Look guys, I'm sorry, but it's not going to happen.'" Thus a media furore was unleashed.

It's not as if Meares, 36, isn't used to media attention. After landing the Moove milk campaign at the age of 16, she ditched school in Year 10 to pursue modelling full-time, making her name as a sought-after bikini model. In 1998, she hooked up with uber-wealthy James Packer and married him in a lavish ceremony (Sir Elton John was their wedding singer) in 1999, but they split in 2002. By that time, Meares had begun to carve out a career in fashion design, launching swimwear line Tigerlily in 2000.

(Interestingly, a model who used to feature prominently in Tigerlily's runway shows was a girl from Gunnedah called Erica Baxter, who last year married Packer.)

As a soap opera, Meares' life takes some beating, but even she was unprepared for the *ANTM* hoo-ha.

"It was so weird," she muses. "I was shocked at how full-on the reaction was. It was quite bizarre."

Given her recent experiences, I'm surprised at how easygoing she is today, although bringing along Tenzin, a large rottweiler cross, might give a nervy celebrity a certain confidence. "Being stalked by reporters when I was putting out my garbage was a bit much," she says, recalling the *ANTM* aftermath, her long-lashed, brown eyes peering over the top of her mug. "I've been in the public eye for a while, but I've never experienced that level of interest. They turn like rattlers, don't they?"

As a result, Meares decreed her TV career over. "I become very nervous when I'm doing things I'm not naturally good at. As you grow older, you realise there's no point beating yourself up if you can't be across everything. I know my strengths and I'm definitely aware of my weaknesses. That chapter of my life is over and I'm ready to move on."

She'll be able to move on to the next phase of her life in style thanks to the sale of Tigerlily in December to surfwear label Billabong, for a reported sum of between \$3 and \$5 million. The deal, which

includes her staying on as a creative director, has cemented her position as a financial success story in her own right, rather than one attached to the sizeable fortune of her ex-husband, of whom she never speaks. "By selling Tigerlily, I was letting go of my baby," she laughs. "But it was time for my baby to take steps out in the world on its own."

So what's next? Surely she can afford to put up her pedicured feet and retire. "Not a chance," she splutters. "I'd go out of my mind with boredom if I didn't work." To that end, she's been appointed a 'lifestyle collaborator' for Melbourne-based property developer R Corporation – the firm that brought French designer Philippe Starck to work on its Tribeca project in East Melbourne. Meares is applying the design flair she honed on her bikinis to kitting out a swish apartment in the \$140 million South Yarra residential project, Clara. "The role has been created for me, which is incredibly flattering," she smiles. "I've always had an interest in design, architecture and interiors. When I was asked to create a space to help show how potential buyers could live, I couldn't wait to become involved."

With her honey-coloured tan and sun-bleached hair, Meares epitomises the high-end Sydney beach babe, rather than the soberly stylish types who will likely inhabit the apartments in one of Melbourne's wealthiest suburbs. "Actually, I was born in Melbourne," she says. "I've always loved its style and European sensibility. I love architecture and antiques, and creating a beautiful environment in my own home. People may think I'm walking around in my bikini the whole time, which I admit, is kind of true," she laughs and thumbs the lime green bikini strap under the white T-shirt and olive green trench she's wrapped in, "but I have other creative interests that I'm now free to pursue."

Having just returned from her first proper holiday in five years – a five-week jaunt around the US and Europe – Meares says she's "peaced out", creatively refreshed and ready for the challenges of her new role. As for the future, she doesn't like to look too far ahead. "I live in the now," she says, finishing her latte. "I never think about what I should be doing in five years' time."

Can she see herself settling down again? "I don't know if I'll be someone who settles down officially, because I've learnt that 'a family' doesn't necessarily mean the traditional set-up. To have someone special would be nice, though. There's no one on the horizon, but it would be nice." Laughing lightly, Meares pats Tenzin, who looks up at her devotedly.

For now, it looks as if he'll have to do. **SM**