

I'm not going to talk about the Packers," says the swimsuit designer formerly known as Jodie Packer, as politely as one can without snapping. "Directly or indirectly. I won't go anywhere near it." This, though disappointing, is no great surprise. The beach princess nicked and reportedly flicked the heart of media heir James Packer, marrying him in a lavish 750-guest wedding in October 1999 before quietly moving out of their shared beachside penthouse less than three years later. A confidentiality agreement tied to a who-knows-how-many-trillion-dollars settlement would be a strong incentive to stay schtum in any circumstance.

Which is why, one supposes, the Packers let her keep that incredibly powerful surname after the couple parted in 2002. As far as Australian surnames go, Packer is a pretty good one. It was Jodie Packer who launched the Tigerlily swimwear label in 2000, Jodhi Packer who this year signed a reported \$300,000 deal to promote a property-development scheme on the Tweed Coast in northern NSW and Jodhi Packer who, in June, burst into our lounge rooms as a guest reporter on the Nine Network's *Getaway*. And then it tumbles out, spontaneously. "I actually don't have the name now," she says as we sip tea on a Sunday afternoon. "It's Meares. Which is quite a recent thing but I guess it's not going to hurt." That must be a big step. "No," she replies, ever calm, ever sure. "It's an evolution. I haven't thought that much about it but I took [my maiden name] back not that long ago. Um, I am divorced. Very recently divorced."

Which is probably the most the reminded Jodhi Meares has ever said about her love-life in public.

Meares, now 34, and her media magnate ex-husband, 37, finally signed the papers after, it's rumoured, Packer stalled the process for a couple of years – an indication of the complexities of love, given that his current relationship with model-singer Erica Baxter has outlasted both his marriage to Meares and his previous engagement with LA-based former model Kate Fischer.

But it's all just rumours. Like the rumour that James insisted on having dinner with Jodhi once a fortnight during their estrangement. Rumours stem from silence, of course, and Meares is adept at applying discretion to every part of her life. Although she's just parted company with bartender Hamish Jordan – who was apparently lured from the arms of prime-ministerial offspring and Jodhi's one-time good friend Katherine Keating into Meares's impressive bosom on the cusp of her marriage break-up – she won't discuss him either, or even confirm their break-up. "I understand," she nods, "you had to ask the question." But she won't have a bar of it. Lesson one about Jodhi Meares: she'll tell you what she wants to.

Refreshingly, Meares is not one of those women who needs to share. "No," she says in her unruffled, authoritative way. "There are times that I do but I process things quietly. In my own time. I'm not that into self-analysis. The more analysing, the more confused I get. Things are what they are."

In person, she is a woman whose beauty is a gift rather than an effort. Shiny mocha hair, skin like whipped fudge and then, of course, those magnificent jutting breasts, which she unashamedly highlights to their best advantage at all times. Her looks show nature at its best: Meares presents better in person

than in photos and she is more beautiful without make-up. We first meet at the corporate headquarters of her swimwear label, Tigerlily. As we speak over tea and Meares's countless cigarettes, she makes it clear she will not be defined by the men in her life – past or present. "They are separate things, your personal life and your business life," she maintains. "And they should always be separate. Very separate."

Which is problematic, given that one particular man in her past personal life introduced her to us in a mainstream way and helped launch her swimwear business. Would Tigerlily have kicked off so well without the Packer money behind her? "This is a question I get asked but, you know? Ultimately, it doesn't matter," says Meares defensively. "Starting Tigerlily at that time may have been harder because we didn't have the opportunity to come out in a small way; it had to be large. There are pros and cons to that. There are a lot of pros to being an underground company and finding your feet. And Tigerlily was going to be started regardless of the way it started. Tigerlily was going to be a success, no question."

And it was a success. In 2000, Jodie Packer, as she was then known, stepped out of the marital box and into the fashion limelight. At Australian Fashion Week in May of that year, she presented her debut swimwear collection, Tigerlily, to an A-list crowd, including her beaming father-in-law, Kerry, her then husband of seven months, James, and what seemed like half of Sydney – many of them ready to tear her down. "You know the fickle world of fashion," sighs Victoria Fisher, a long-time friend who also used to act as the publicist for Tigerlily. "There were people waiting for her to fail that night." →

# jodhi

*At one time she carried one of the most powerful names in the country but the former Mrs James Packer – now fashion designer Jodhi Meares – has stepped out of the media-family's shadow and is calling her own shots. By Libbi Gorr.*

Photography Jez Smith



Beach princess Jodhi Meares  
in Tahiti for Tigerlily's  
latest catalogue.

Styling: Andrew Hainsworth. Hair: David Keogh. Make-up: Dotti. Location: Radisson Plaza Resort, Tahiti



Meares (centre) auditions for *Baywatch Down Under* in 1998.



Meares with her then husband, James Packer, in 2001.



With her brother, Jason Meares, and her mother, Denise Macpherson, last year.

You may recall the photos that dominated the front page of newspapers the next day. A waterfall. Models splashing through a lap-pool catwalk. Czech model Eva Herzigova strutting out in a \$500,000 pearl-encrusted bikini. Only big Packer-sized dollars can give you this, surely? "Well," Meares shrugs gamely, "you don't know. You play the cards as they are dealt. We've never advertised in our lives. So it depends where your marketing budget goes."

Packer didn't have to advertise. She generated her own hype. Not only did she wow the crowd with a whole lot of glitz, she produced a collection that earned her kudos among the fashion set.

"Of course, it helped her having untold funds and enormous fame," says fashion writer Maggie Alderson, who pens a column in Fairfax's *Good Weekend* each week. "There is no doubt the associated fame of her marriage made the range much more interesting at the onset. But I do think the range was good enough that she would've made it anyway. Even with masses of cash, it is still very stressful to run a business, design a collection and put on a fashion show. So I respect her hugely for doing it."

Five years later, the marriage has come and gone and Jodie Packer is now Jodhi Meares. The first name change – from Jodie with an "e" to Jodhi with an "h" – was announced via a press release in 2002. "I was actually born with the 'h'," explains Meares patiently. "My mum is a numerologist so she is into letters and that sort of thing. I changed it to 'ie' because I got teased at school. They called me 'Jode Hee'."

Meares constantly refers to her mother, Denise Macpherson, who separated from Jodhi's publican father, John Meares, when Jodhi Kayla was 18 months old. Denise left the Merimbula pub John ran with his parents on NSW's South Coast and

relocated to Sydney, a 25-year-old single mum with three children – Jason, Kirsty and Jodhi – all under five. "Then we moved all over Sydney," recalls Meares, who was born in Melbourne's Sandringham. "I think we moved 47 times. We didn't own a house. We were renters. I'm very used to change."

According to Meares's school records, she spent years 7 and 8 at Sydney's Cremorne Girls High before moving to Hunters Hill High for year 9 and part of year 10. When she was 13, Denise remarried and gave birth to Meares's adored little sister, Sophie, now 20. At 14, Meares moved to Queensland to be with her father, enrolling at Southport High on the Gold Coast, with no clear direction or career path in mind. "I went to a few schools in my years at high school. I was a ratbag." Then, modelling arrived to shape her world.

Her aunt "knew somebody" and put her forward for a casting for a Moove milk campaign. She got the job and an agent. "I just thought it would be fun, a bit of money." Meares left school at 15, halfway through year 10. "That's when I really fell in love with swimwear. I love the word bikini; it reminds me of the beach, my childhood, all of those things."

Sister Kirsty, now 36 and a photographic assistant, remembers her sister's bikini obsession with fond horror. "For years, she'd give me this risqué bikini for Christmas. We have very different confidence levels about our bodies. I'd have to put it on because I didn't want to hurt her feelings. She'd tell you that you had to wear it, just like that. There'd be no argument."

Meares is the quintessential beach girl. Ask about her friends and the list sounds straight out of *Puberty Blues*: Stanners, Juzzy, Frenchie, Puddles, Dave the Wave. Not a chick among them. "I've got girlfriends, too, but I was a real tomboy at school. When I went to an all-girls school, I absolutely hated it. I was into

riding my BMX bike." Co-education suited her better. "I think I naturally made friends with boys. Now I still have lots of male friends. There's a lot to be said for just going to the pub and saying, 'I've had a f---ed day. I want to down three schooners and have a game of pool.' Sometimes you can work things out a lot better by not having to say a lot – just have your mates there saying, 'It's all right, buddy. We're here.'"

The size of the diamonds distending her delicate earlobes, however, are a dead giveaway that she was once a member of an exclusive club. "They're fabulous, aren't they? I love them," she deflects smoothly. "They should be worn. That's why I wear them on Sundays. I don't go to any posh events so they'd be sitting in a drawer." As to their size? "I dunno," she shrugs nonchalantly. "They're big. Very large. Enormous, in fact. Ice-skating rinks."

It's "amazing" to be given diamonds, she adds, "an incredible thing. Any girl who has been given them will tell you that. They are beautiful. But you know, to me, they are just as beautiful as a friendship band that somebody I loved would have given me when I was 15. I know it sounds ridiculous..." Her voice falters. Is it seductive? "Jewellery? Not to me. Other things are much more seductive than diamonds."

Like being independent, I guess. Like making your dreams come true. Such is the will of Meares that, in conjunction with fashion PR's brightest, she orchestrated shooting the catalogue for Tigerlily's most recent collection in Tahiti. Such was my luck, I went with them. Meares successfully pitched a "making of the Tigerlily catalogue" documentary to her ex's Nine Network. According to Meares, she received no special treatment – only air time – and had to bear all the production costs herself, with no access to any of the advertising revenue.



The designer and her models at a Tigerlily parade in Melbourne last year.

“I believe in personal ethics and I believe in being a good person. I try not to judge. You have no idea what anyone’s going through.”

As the models loll about in the famous black sands of Tahiti, Meares watches closely. She rarely interferes with the team’s work, only occasionally stepping in to pass low-voiced instructions, always accompanied by terms of endearment – sweetheart, honey, darling, babe. “What distinguishes Jodhi from others in the industry is her complete lack of ego,” says Victoria Fisher, who is part of the entourage. “That’s why she still has the same group of people around her, supporting her.”

It’s obvious from the rapport within Team Tigerlily that Meares is well liked by those she lets in. And towards those she doesn’t, she still maintains warmth and charm. “It sounds like a real wank,” she says, “but I believe in personal ethics and I believe in being a good person. I try not to judge. You have no idea what anyone’s going through at any particular time.”

She has supported former casting agent Liz Mullinar’s Mayumarrri healing centre, in NSW’s Hunter Valley, which offers counselling and rehabilitation for victims of childhood sexual abuse, since 1999. Meares is obviously devoted to Mullinar’s cause and quotes statistics with ease. “One in four girls will be sexually abused before she’s 18 and one in seven boys. And they are reported cases. Usually by someone they know or a family member, often. Something like 87 per cent of the women in our detention centres were sexually abused.” What drew her to this cause, in particular? Has someone she knows been hurt enough by this to draw her support? “I think you’ll find everyone does, if you break it down,” she replies, carefully. “There are not many people I’ve met that haven’t.” Is it close to her personally? “Yep.” Beyond child-abuse victim Mullinar’s well-publicised experience? “I’m not going to go any further with that because it’s...” Her voice trails off.

Meares’s venture into business began in 1996, when she capitalised on her bikini-clad appearances in *Inside Sport* and *Ralph* magazines. (*Ralph* is owned by the Packer family’s Australian Consolidated Press and after the pair became an item in 1999, James Packer rang the office and ordered that all unsold issues featuring Meares be sent to him.) The popular pin-up girl set up “Beers with Meares”, a promotions company that incorporated the *Inside Sport* brand with a team of “sport” models – that is, models who look fabulous in bikinis – hired out to pubs to chat to patrons at functions.

“The girls would do appearances,” recalls Justin “Juzzy” McMillan, 29, who has known Meares for since they both worked at the same bar in Sydney’s Paddington 10 years ago and is directing the documentary of her Tahitian photo shoot. “Like ‘play pool with the *Inside Sport* girl.’ All sweet girls who’d talk to dudes for a while.” Meares remembers the time fondly. “We hired them out at \$300 an hour. There were about 10 of us at one stage. Many were my mates so it was a lot of fun.”

“I guess that was the thing I appreciated about her,” draws McMillan. “She actually did get off her arse and do stuff. She’s a bit of a survivor like that. She’s not too proud. She’s not like, ‘Oh f---, I’m not going to talk to those guys.’ She’s like, ‘I’ll go talk and smoke ciggies and play pool with Joe from Blacktown because I need to pay the rent.’ Which I felt was quite honourable.”

The business concept, Meares explains, was “a means to an end to starting Tigerlily”, which had its genesis around 1998, in conversation with Jeff Moss of the Pretty Girl Fashion Group. “She had a passion for swimwear and a passion for the brand,” says Moss, who is in partnership with James Packer and

describes himself as “good friends” with the mogul-in-waiting. “Tigerlily came from what [Meares] knew was good in swimwear and what she thought was missing in the market.” The Pretty Girl Fashion Group provided the manufacturing infrastructure for Tigerlily, with Meares in charge of design and branding.

Five years after Tigerlily launched, the brand occupies a boutique niche in the world of swimwear. The label is sold in more than 400 stores around Australasia and employs 15 full-time staff. Meares won’t talk dollar signs but says the business is “good. It’s been growing 30 per cent every year.”

In 2002, Tigerlily signed a licensing agreement with the Gazal Corporation, long since expired. “I took it over solely as mine a year and a half ago,” says Meares. “I’ve got a great accountant and a really good bookkeeper but other than that, I sort of run it all – with their very, very good guidance.”

She dreams of catapulting Tigerlily into the realm of surf-wear giant Billabong. Consequently, nearly half of Tigerlily’s revenue now comes from its fashion range – tiny shorts, sheer tops and floaty skirts.

“James is not really involved with the business any more and nor am I,” says Moss. “If she keeps delivering good product and executes well, she’ll be fine. She’s built a name for herself now.”

And that name just happens to be Meares. A woman who doesn’t like being told what to do – “I hate it. Doesn’t go down well at all” – and for whom “harsh people” are “definitely out”. “I don’t have a lot of friends,” she says. “I have a very small circle.” Suddenly, a piece of her carefully contained public self escapes without notice. “The gypsy, they call me. I move around a bit. I need change – really need it – and if it’s not happening, I make it happen. I really need my freedom.” ●