

# CHASING CHAS

LIBBI GORR CATCHES ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST WANTED, THE CHASER'S CHAS LICCIARDELLO.  
Words Libbi Gorr Photography Steve Baccon



Chas Licciardello is good natured and relentlessly upbeat to a fault. "You can say I live in Croydon Park", he laughs ruefully. "They say it every time I get arrested – a 29 year old man from Croydon Park."

Croydon Park is a conservative suburb, in Sydney's inner west. Nothing too groovy, a little bit ethnic – in the process of gentrification. It is a solid suburb. Hardly bohemian. And hardly the home of political uprisings.

"I'm not some hard core street fighter", Chas muses, in one of the three snatched chats we have to create this interview. "I've got a wife, and I just watch TV and keep to myself. I don't want to go to jail, that's for sure. If people think I'd risk going to jail for ratings or something like that, that's certainly not the case."

But jail certainly is one of the penalties top rating ABC comics Chas Licciardello, Julian Morrow and nine others face when they front court in December charged with 'Entering a Restricted Zone' under the 2007 APEC legislation. Audaciously posing as a Canadian motorcade, the team penetrated Sydney's \$160m security system to enter the 'red zone'; landing not only metres away from the Australian digs of US President George W Bush, but deep in the poo with the NSW Police.

The guys maintain it was a fluke; they fully intended to be turned away at a barrier so that Licciardello (dressed as Osama Bin Laden) could exit the limousine, complaining loudly about security being too tight. But a loophole meant their motorcade was waved through. "The road is yours", called the police, clearly audible on tape.

"We didn't actually know we were in the red zone", explains Licciardello, still amazed at this current pickle. "We're not that brave. We had the advice of our lawyers ringing in our ears; 'Do NOT go into the red zone. You can go into the green zone if they let you, but DO NOT go into the red zone.'"

Licciardello has been in trouble before, in the name of funny footage. He was arrested at a Canterbury Bulldogs Football match selling merchandise made to suit your average Bulldog supporter. That is, in Chas speak; knives, knuckledusters and other murderous appendages. The case was thrown out of court with Chas in TV character to the end, conducting post court interviews with an Australian flag draped Freemanesque around his shoulders.

He calculates every risk, he says, and is aware of the dangers and pitfalls of every stunt undertaken. But it's not physical danger that bothers him. "I hate stripping for the camera", he confides. "I always feel like I'm fat and disgusting. I always look at my gut. I don't care about the hair – it's just the fat. I really don't like looking at the fat."

Partly for that reason, Chas Licciardello doesn't drink.

"I'm a bit of a control freak, and I don't like the idea of acting like an idiot in a way that I can't control", he laughs. "But I'm also neurotic about my weight and of course beer is all carbs."

**"I don't want to go to jail, that's for sure. If people think I'd risk going to jail for ratings or something like that, that's certainly not the case."**



**“Has it NOT occurred to me that I’m obsessive? I’m the most obvious clinically obsessive person...I’m a text book example of obsessive.”**

He’s happy to expand on this, even though his waistline can’t.

“I was obsessive about my weight when I was a little kid. My parents had a funny letter they dug up that I sent to them from my grandmother’s place when I was on holiday. And I gave them a day to day chart of my weight when I was six. I weighed myself every day.”

As a law science student majoring in physics and computer science at Sydney University, Licciardello bulked up – a good 20 kilos up on what he is now – to carry 96 kilos on his 5ft nine frame. Soon after, his entire family headed to The Golden Door.

“It’s a fat camp on the Gold Coast”, he explains, without a hint of awkwardness. “They taught us a basic education of ways of keeping weight off and living healthily. And it worked. I dropped 25 kilos in a year.”

The Chaser has a punishing schedule. Chas freely admits he’s a workaholic; up early, scripting, shooting, editing, re-editing, writing preparing, then home late in the evening. This makes staying in shape no mean feat, given he exists on takeaway most of the time.

“I make it my business to know the kilojoules, the GI and the fat content of everything that’s out there”, he matter-of-factly says, happily admitting that most days he eats exactly the same meals from exactly the same outlets.

“He’s obsessional about his food and abjectly terrified of becoming fat”, confirms friend and fellow Chaser, Andrew Hansen. “Because he wants to count every joule and carb that goes into his body, he needs his food to be packaged with those little statistics printed on the box. He can’t eat at a restaurant, for instance, or eat a home-cooked meal. It has to be food from a fast-food chain with a nutritional information brochure, or else packets of chips. Therefore he’s managed to perfect a junk food-only diet – I told him if he wrote it in book form it’d be an international bestseller.”

He knows how it sounds. “Yeaahhh...” he drawls good naturedly, as I pose the obvious question.

“Has it NOT occurred to me that I’m obsessive? I’m the most obvious clinically obsessive person...I’m a text book example of obsessive.”

He reckons it’s working more for than against him at the moment, with the “weight thing” his major bugbear. But he no longer washes his hands all the time.

“When I was a little kid I was obsessed with being clean but all of a sudden I achieved enough knowledge to realise that in reality, you’re stuffed when it comes to cleanliness. There are germs everywhere and you are never going to get rid of them. And so then I went to the other extreme, and just became a real grub.”

Music is his passion, and he stores tens of thousands of MP3s on his computer, catalogued by year, from Australia, England and the US, plus the album of origin. “The other guys often refer to me as

autistic”, he jokes. “Which I think is very unfair to autistic people.”

Long time friend and Chaser stalwart Dominic Knight backs this up, teasing, “There are definitely some ways in which Chas resembles Rain Man”.

Andrew Hansen concurs, “Chas owns a DVD player that enables you to watch DVDs at double-speed and still hear the audio. So people on your TV all speak like this at double speed. Chas watches his DVDs on this setting so he can see twice as much.”

The weird thing is, I don’t think Hansen is joking.

But it’s this obsessiveness that gives The Chaser great moments, especially in the TV current affairs segment. Licciardello logs every single current affairs show by time code and then refiles it under three or four different systems. “If I see a shit re-enactment on a current affairs show”, he explains, “within five seconds I can find every shit re-enactment that’s been on in the last two years. I’m very obsessive with my cataloguing. It amuses me.”

It’s no surprise, therefore, that Chas describes his wife of just one year, Jocelyn Laurence, as “patient”. They met in their first year at Sydney University, in something dorky like a physics class. Losing contact after study, a chance meeting in the street kindled romance. Now at 30, Jocelyn too is a force to be reckoned with, with a PhD and a job analysing biotech stocks for a stockbroking firm. “I believe one person doesn’t substitute their life for the others. Jocelyn lives her own life and I like that. I like smart girls – independent girls and girls who are tough.”

His own drive is best found in his childhood. Born in 1977, Chas has an older sister by three years, Grace-Marie. Their parents, Alf and Josie Licciardello, raised the family in the then non-trendy suburb of Maroubra. Josie’s health was fragile through much of his childhood, and Chas’ dad, a real estate agent, worked punishing hours, rarely home. “It’s the Cat’s in the Cradle as far as that goes”, Chas reflects now.

It was Claremont College, a little Anglican primary school in the eastern suburbs, that saw Chas at his embryonic prankster stage. “I got into a lot of trouble there”, his voice drops. “I didn’t really know where the line was”. His parents were consulted on how to deal with the increasingly troublesome and solitary child.

“I didn’t know what was going on”, he recalls. “All of a sudden I was seeing lots of psychiatrists and taking lots of tests. And then I found myself at Sydney Grammar.” Eight years old and a ‘wog’ from Maroubra.

“In primary school (at Grammar) it was mostly rich people and there was a little bit of a snooty environment, which is probably part of why I kept to myself as well. But at Grammar’s High School, there are scholarships everywhere and there are a lot of people who

7

6

aren't rich but just work very hard to send their kids there."

And High School is where it all changed for Licciardello. In year seven he immediately befriended fellow future Chaser, Dominic Knight.

"We bonded over being awful at woodwork while sharing a bench", jokes Knight. "But in later years we've come to discover a world of other things we're both awful at, and enjoyed that together as well."

The way Licciardello tells it, Knight commandeered the school newspaper, taking Chas with him. Then Charles Firth, from the year above them – and another founding member of The Chaser, who has since established *The Manic Times* – joined the team. The boys weren't publishing satirical news then, just comedy with rambling columns like Chas and Dom's guide to dating or, as Chas calls it, "juvenile abuse" thinly disguised as music reviews.

At 14, The D-Generation's The Late Show hit TV screens on the ABC, and it's easy to believe when Licciardello says he "became obsessive about the show". This child who kept to himself was emerging from his shell. Returning from school one day he was confronted by Maroubra's notorious Bra Boys and defended himself with lip.

"It's probably good to get hit once or twice in your life", he reasons now, without obvious rancour. Dom Knight was there to tend the bruises, "To be fair to the Bra Boys...Chas in high school..." he remembers affectionately, "It's amazing he wasn't beaten up more often."

In year twelve Chas was appointed a prefect on the condition that he would wear a tie. On principle, Licciardello refused. Called to the Headmaster to explain, Licciardello stood his ground. He was appointed a prefect with no caveat on the tie. This was a school that fostered self belief and confidence in being an individual. He explains, "No one fits into Sydney Grammar. Everyone is a member of a minority – all very, very different people. At least, it was like that when I was there."

But all smart?

"Usually. At least smart arses", he quips.

It was at Sydney University that The Chaser came together. Hansen remembers, "I first laid eyes on him when he was performing a stand-up routine. It was a competition called "5-Minute Noodles", the idea being that students would get up and do a 'tight five'. Chas felt he had more to offer than five measly minutes, and chose to do a tight 55."

The boys you see on the telly now flocked from the university rag, law and arts revues and the debating society to take part in a brand new satirical newspaper.

"*The Chaser* was Charles' idea," remembers Licciardello. "It was meant to be a drink, a chaser after your real newspaper. No one seems to understand any more. They all think it's about chasing

people." Andrew Denton became a fan, and – hello television!

The Chaser honed their visual skills for years before assuming responsibility for prime time on the ABC. Late night spots and election specials have developed their comic sensibilities and television savvy to make The War on Everything series their most slickly successful. Yet Licciardello shies away from describing the show as post 9/11 comedy; explosive comedic moments designed to create mayhem in everyday lives. "I think it looks more explosive on TV than they are in real life. We go to a lot of trouble to not actually disrupt people's lives in reality."

He's happy to deconstruct The Chaser on this basis, to explain that a lot of their pranks are just set ups. "I hate people who pretend to be something that they are not and I don't want to go around pretending I'm some big tough guy when I'm not. We are creating a comedy show. I don't think we are changing the world. So I am very keen to dispel that notion".

He's thoughtful, sitting there, half in costume – this time as an orthodox Jew, about to film a phone sex ad.

"I'm not trying to be good because of the trial", he explains, twirling his forelocks. "I'm just not really the kind of hard core rebel that people think I am. I'm not wild at all in my everyday life, but I do enjoy poking fun at authority. I've always been like that. Mrs Brown, the principal at Claremont College, can testify to that, he laughs."

Scuttlebutt is that the DPP wants the charges against The Chaser dropped, whilst the Police Minister is baying for blood. "We've heard that too", acknowledges Licciardello cautiously. But after all, it's only fat that really bothers him – nothing else, just fat. So let's hope there's no televised strip search.

"I always end up doing the stripping type segments at the end of the run, when I am in my worst possible condition. That is definitely what I hate the most."

The prospect of imprisonment is extremely remote. But The Chaser, being The Chaser, certainly do like to prepare for all possible outcomes.

"He'd do what he does in restaurants – moan and bellow and clutch the side of his head in agony, desperately sifting through prison food to find a piece of lettuce", sighs Hansen.

"Chas quite likes confined spaces", muses Dom Knight. "He used to study by wedging himself into a cubby-like hole in his bedroom. So I imagine solitary confinement will suit him just fine with even the rattiest prison food. As long as it's low in fat and he can spend hours pumping iron. But if they try and make him eat cheese, he'll probably go for the cook with a home made shiv." ■

"I'm just not really the kind of hard core rebel that people think I am. I'm not wild at all in my everyday life, but I do enjoy poking fun at authority. I've always been like that."

