

SULLY GO ROUND

Although her home is in Sydney and her audience is nationwide, her heart is firmly rooted in Queensland. The story of television personality and news anchor Sandra Sully is confirmation of the maxim that hard work pays off.

'You know what they say,' Sandra Sully says, 'you can take the girl out of Queensland but you can never take Queensland out of the girl.' Her voice is friendly and matter of fact. It is a weekday afternoon and she is just about to begin preparing the late-night television news for Network Ten.

'Look, I do love Sydney and it's my home,' she continues, 'but I can never get Queensland out of my blood. There's something about the light, the heat, the humidity. When the grass is mown on a Saturday afternoon, it smells different.'

Sully grew up in Brisbane, living until she was about 22 at the inner southern suburb of Tarragindi. With a close-knit family and three siblings - a twin sister and two older brothers - her childhood was filled with action.

'Sport was a big part of my childhood,' she muses. 'My sister and I were very active but we had two older brothers and a father who loved football so we spent the winter in Brisbane at football fields and we were at hockey and netball, so Mum and Dad were the perennial drivers. And we spent the summers at the beach.'

That passion for sport hasn't dimmed. Sully's body is toned and her skin glows with health, making it hard to believe she is forty-something. She has a beauty that's a mix of wholesome and polished. But she demurs about her looks. 'You've made my day,' she laughs. 'I don't feel like that at the minute. Shift work knocks you around a bit.'

Sully has one survival tip - the afternoon 'Sophia' on the sofa: 'That's the only way I can get enough sleep. Sophia Loren claimed that it was the secret to her good looks in older age. I used to call it a nanna nap but it made me feel too old. I thought Sophia's far more glamorous, you know. You gotta talk it up,' she laughs.

One of Australia's most popular women on TV, Sandra Sully is the weekday national anchor for Network Ten Late News. She joined Ten almost 15 years ago as a political reporter.

Sully has also worked on radio, other Network Ten news and documentaries, on radio and with Seven, breaking into the male-dominated television-hosting world of horse racing when she co-hosted the Melbourne racing carnival from the 1997 and 1998 Melbourne Cups.

Yet Sully had no aspirations to be a journalist. 'It was a completely serendipitous route,' she admits. She pursued recreation and health as a career option before realising it was

more of a hobby, including spending a year studying health in Pennsylvania as an exchange student in the early 1980s.

'I was outside my comfort zone,' she reflects. 'The Allegheny Mountains are spectacular rolling hills of autumnal shades of maple trees. Growing up in Queensland you're aware of the hot and cold, but not the seasons in between. I'm still close to a girl I met over there - we reconnected through horse racing.'

Another love is car racing. Sully was the fastest woman in the 2004 Grand Prix. 'I was very happy with myself, she says with glee. 'It was one of the greatest thrills of my life. I was threatened all week with the sack if I beat my boss I whipped his butt!'

Back from the USA, Sully switched to a correspondence business degree, and landed a job in a TV station 'by accident' - a cadetship in Brisbane's Channel Seven newsroom. When Christopher Skase's 'spot of bother' meant downsizing, news director Larry Somerton offered her a production job. Sully had a mortgage so she made a deal: 'How about I do that during the week and on weekends I work full-time as a journalist. Then once or twice a week I go out and do a couple of small stories if I guarantee to be back at four, have my story written by five and then put the news to air by six.'

Somerton, a 'kind, generous soul', agreed. 'I'd fallen in love with journalism - I couldn't believe the passion and energy and drive people had, and the deadlines and the adrenaline rush.'

She had fallen for politics, too. She joined senior political reporter Mike Darcy when she could down at 'state parly'. 'These were the days just after Joh [Bjelke-Petersen] so it was fascinating times, with Russ Hinze and the rest of them and I used to hang out at state parly as much as I could. I loved it when Joh used to talk about feeding the chooks; I loved the irreverence of journalism.'

Soon Sully went regional on the local political round at Canberra's brand-new Prime TV. "Regional" meant "jack of all trades": two to four stories a day, maybe write the weather, present the news, roll Autocues, assist the director - great to learn the craft of TV journalism. A month later the federal election was called; it was a 'baptism of fire, but what other way to learn.' Another upheaval meant a move to Channel 10 as a junior, then after 18 months yet another move- to Sydney as the second string on the political round.

Sully denies that she is ambitious. As a child she had no career plans. She knew she needed financial security: 'It was only to afford other things that other people seemed to have.' She adds, 'But when I love something it's all or nothing. I wanted to give journalism my best shot. I didn't want to live a life of regret.'

Sully's family wasn't well off. 'It was instilled in me at a young age that the only person that was gonna provide me with

superannuation was me. So I had my first house at 20, a little western red cedar house at Holland Park with my then-boyfriend.'

Even at high school Sully had two part-time jobs. 'My sister and I worked at the Albion Park trots every Saturday night when we were underage,' she recalls. 'I used to serve Russ Hinze his burgers. He had a lot, I can tell you! I never told him my brother was one of his town planners.'

'I like hard work,' she continues. 'When opportunities came up to read, I knew that that would provide more financial security [than reporting] for me as a single woman.' Downsides mean women in television sacrifice being on the road and the opportunities men have later in life. Sully is proudly feminist like her 'fiercely independent' yet still happily married mother.

She is surprised to learn that she is featured on websites such as aussiebabes.com. 'Am I?' she pauses. 'Yeah, people who don't have too much to do, I suspect. I never considered myself all that good-looking,' she declares. 'Like most women, I find it hard to get past my faults.' She pauses. 'But this is all highly topical given the drama of the new news set cleavage issue.'

She was 'surprised, bemused and frustrated' by the fuss earlier this year when Ten redesigned its late-night news set with her sitting side-on to the desk, showing her head to toe instead of the standard head and upper torso. The phones rang hot with listener complaints and southern-state wits went to town, describing 'a heaving bosom of Dangerous Liaisons proportions' (Spike, Sydney Morning Herald) and 'The Late News with Sandra Sully's knees' (The Age). Sully was accused of switching to push-up bras and becoming Saucy Sully. Matt Condon commented (Courier-Mail) that Sully was being 'dismembered'.

'Someone called it "a storm in a C-cup",' she jokes. But it still rankles: 'I'm pretty unhappy about it because I work really hard to be taken seriously as a journalist and newsreader.'

On that first night there was no full-dress rehearsal as the set wasn't finished till that afternoon - just a camera rehearsal for angles and for her to get a feel for the set. Sully had specified 'a pants suit, no skin, it's less distracting' for that night because the set was the point of difference and there were new openers, closers etc. 'I wore a suit and top I'd worn half a dozen times before,' she explains.

But they were unaware of new camera angles across the chest, unforgiving with the new lighting. 'So you get more shadows. So now I have a cleavage. Now I'm wearing booster bras. Did I enjoy it? No. Were the network happy with the publicity? Yes. They loved it.'

The feminist Catherine Lumby, associate professor of media studies at Sydney University, said: 'They're damned if they do and damned if they don't. I think it's good women are actually

reading the news. In the past, to be taken seriously you had to be a 55-year-old man in a suit." (Sydney Morning Herald.)

'It's an image game,' Sully says. 'The new set is so innovative with no desk between me and the viewer. It's a very intimate setting in that time slot, so I guess that was the purpose behind the styling. Late News is a much more intimate setting. 'I'm often in people's bedrooms. It's a scary thought - it can be a bit alarming. I honestly believe most men put up with me to get the sports. They love "Sports Tonight".'

The furore highlights the evolution of the newsreader; originally actors were employed for their good diction before the 1980s, when journalists took over. Sully 's role of "news anchor" - a term coined in 1952 - may cover writing, editing and presenting news or interviewing guests, even providing special-event commentary. It is reduced from being the central presenter by the technology that enables other journalists to broadcast from outside locations.

The desk-bound aspect frustrates Sully, who loved being on the road, doing the Cup: 'learning about broadcasting for eight hours on air away from the desk.'

Women's on-air presentation is another work in progress. 'When I started reading in Sydney in about '93, I wanted to wear shirts and lose the jacket,' Sully says, 'but it took me five years. We were one of the leaders in softening the on-air look for women - tops without collars and just plain shirts. So it could be smart, but I didn't need shoulder pads to compete.'

Designers have only just evolved a corporate women's look - tailored but feminine, classic, contemporary. 'I wear quite a bit of Hugo Boss, it's perfect for me,' says Sully. 'Quite a bit of Wayne Cooper, a bit of Rebecca Davies' Bare, a little Kate Sylvester, a bit of Kate Sylvester, a bit of Zimmerman; we mix and match.'

One part of the celebrity status that Sully enjoys is glamming it up. 'What girl doesn't like getting frocked up in some beautiful clothes,' she asks. Not surprising, with her not-so-wealthy background.

There was a fuss in the USA when the Today breakfast show's cohost Katie Couric wore navy blue for George W Bush's re-election results. 'No, it wasn't black!' she insisted in Vogue magazine.

Like Couric, Sully has blonde, girl-next-door good looks, surpassing by now the level of girl next door as a glamorous celebrity in her own right. Unlike Couric, whose opinions on everything from abortion to politics are well known, Sully keeps her opinions strictly to herself, with a journalistic pride in her objectivity. 'I've got lots of views about things,' she says, 'but as a journalist I can't express them I prefer MC work to speaking as I don't have to offer an opinion.'

Sully other strong family bond is with her fraternal twin, Lynelle - a freelance computer trainer and mother. 'People always say you come into this world alone and out go out alone,' she says. 'Well I didn't - I came in with someone. She's a mother of two and I'm very independent, but there's an unspokenness that you can't quite describe to other people. A synergy.' '

Sully's secondary education took place at the highly esteemed Brisbane State High School, whose alumni include cricketers such as Ian Healy, Olympian swimmer Hayley Lewis, ex-Governor General Bill Hayden, pollies Bill O'Chee, Mal Colston and George Georges, actor Ray Barrett; rugby champ Wally Lewis, corporate whiz Dr Ed Tweddell, opera critic/arts administrator Charles Osborne, architect Robyn Gibson, former Salvation Army world leader General Eva Burrows and late Morgans stockbroking founder Paul "Porky" Morgan. 'One of the greatest gifts my parents gave me, apart from life, was access to that school,' Sully says.

'My mother fought very hard to get us into State High because we didn't live in the immediate area. My parents grew up in West End and they believed it was the best public school in Brisbane. We got a wonderful leg-up in life by being able to go to State High.

'If you're surrounded by achievers something rubs off. The pennies drop later in life when you see what's possible.' She tries to find the right words. 'It was a really diverse ethnic mix - Italian, Greek, Russian, Polish and Caucasian, from all socioeconomic groups.'

The job can be difficult sometimes. The year 2001 was tough all round, with the Thredbo disaster, when she just happened to be holidaying there, in addition to the death of Princess Diana and INXS' singer Michael Hutchence.

'They were calling me the calamity queen for a while - they were finding out where I was going on holidays so they wouldn't be there.' She laughs.

When September 11 2001 happened, Sully was in the studio. 'Yeah, we broke it here,' she says. 'It was extremely wrenching and one of the most difficult jobs I've ever done in the chair.

'I was groping to comprehend the magnitude of the disaster that was unfolding before my eyes, let alone describe it. The hardest thing was, the newsroom was virtually empty. There was no information; I had CNN in my ear, that was all. I just hoped I would get the tone right.

'I felt hysterical inside but of course I couldn't be.' Sully's voice has changed. It is slow, heavy, thick.

'We lived through the horror,' she continues, 'the second building being attacked, the buildings collapsing, the Pentagon being attacked, the other plane going down.

'You were worried sick it was a terrible joke, and yet you couldn't help but believe what you were seeing. Even CNN - everyone was unsure of the veracity of what they were seeing. We got George Bush to air before the Americans. Watching Bush being told, I'll never forget his facial expression.' She chooses her words carefully. 'He was stunned, shocked, struggling to comprehend what he was hearing.'

Sully didn't sleep for about a week or cry for almost that long. 'That night, watching groups of five and eight people hold hands and jump to their deaths... those images are etched forever. The tsunami happened more recently and it's a far greater calamity in terms of the number of deaths. But for me, that was a tough one to get through.' She went to both New York and Bali for the anniversaries.

The capricious nature of the TV business is no news to Sully. 'I've never been a planner and I'm not about to start,' she says. 'I'm someone that doesn't sit back either. I make sure I'm happy and that I'm doing things that stimulate me.'

'I never imagined this would be my life. I feel eternally grateful and lucky for the opportunities I've had and if it all ends tomorrow, it's OK. TV is tough. You're as good as your last update. As a woman, there's a lovely intellectual side and there's a very feminine side and I'm lucky to be able to straddle that as a woman. To exercise your brain, and then you get to play dress-ups.'

'I'm never going to complain. As long as I get my Sophias I'm happy!'

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