

COVER STORY

Tony Armstrong, the first Indigenous person to call an AFL game on commercial radio, didn't plan on a media career. Now a rising star at the ABC, he plans to make the most of opportunity.

Tony Armstrong is looking sharp. Sporting a smart blue blazer, jeans, dressy shoes and a shirt with no tie, the ABC sports presenter is fresh from a photo shoot. Before that, he was busy being beamed around the country in his new (television) role on *News Breakfast*. "I can tell you, if I was on radio, I wouldn't be caught dead wearing this any longer than I had to. I'd be in matching trackies," he laughs, peering out through ABC Southbank's huge foyer windows. "It's a bit cold out there, so I'd have a hoodie on, too. I'd look like a real scumbag."

The 31-year-old ex-footballer is quick to joke at his own expense. Several times during our chat, colleagues are arrested by the cheeky handlebar moustache smile he flashes from across the room.

But behind the good looks and friendly nature is a more serious side. Following the furore earlier this year over Eddie McGuire's comments at a press conference about systemic racism at the Collingwood Football Club, Armstrong appeared as a guest on Raf Epstein's *Drive* radio show. As a former player at Collingwood, a proud Barranbinya man and a sports media commentator, Armstrong was eminently qualified to speak. "We're sick of hearing that they will change," he said during the interview. "Everyone's, I think, quite sick of that. We're all pretty keen to see some action."

Armstrong has never met his Aboriginal father. He grew up in Cabramatta, in Sydney's south-west; an only child going to the same school at which his mother, Margaret Armstrong, taught. His three best mates were Cambodian, Vietnamese and Croatian. "It was great," he says of those early years. "I suppose I learned multiculturalism from a really young age. And mum used to take me to the Aboriginal Dance Theatre in Redfern. We used to go there on Saturdays, which was great. So [I] filled my cup a bit there as well."

Armstrong started playing Australian rules around age 10. "I took to it like a duck to water. I became, as all kids do, just so obsessed."

Fuelled by his natural talent, the obsession drew the small family closer to the code's heartland, and they moved near Albury. Soon, Tony found himself boarding in Victoria at Assumption College,

nicknamed the "football factory" by some for its many AFL-playing alumni. As one of only three other Indigenous students, Armstrong felt for the first time what it was like to be an outsider. "But it was so great. I was a boarder, and I was good at footy. What more currency do you want at a joint like Assumption?"

His entry into professional football happened at dizzying speed. Within two days of finishing his last exam, the 18-year-old had been drafted, moved to Adelaide, and started training with the Crows.

But over the next nine years Armstrong – traded to Sydney in 2011 and then Collingwood in 2013 – would play only 35 games. The experience of not being picked for the senior side week after week was demoralising. Then he was delisted in 2015. "It's tough. But also, it was about bloody time. I hadn't really taken the next step. I was still playing footy and living in La La Land. I needed to get into the real world."

For Armstrong, that meant a couple of years taking stock of who he was and what he cared about. He worked a stint in advertising thanks to a friend who thought he might be good at it (he was). He dabbled in mentoring. Then, while hanging out with his friend, triple-premiership Brisbane legend Chris Johnson, Armstrong's life changed.

"As I was leaving, he was like, 'Hey, brother, do you want to try doing some special comments on the National Indigenous Radio Service?' I was like, f-- it, why not?"

The exposure on NIRS led to Brian "BT" Taylor recommending him to Triple M. But only a select few make it in the world of special comments. And, with just an unremarkable three dozen games under his belt, Armstrong knew he was not one of them.

"Triple M said, 'Have you tried calling?' And I said, 'What's that?' Following the commercial station's advice, he began commentating AFL games play-by-play for NIRS radio and, in 2018, called the West Coast-Collingwood grand final. The following year Triple M came knocking and Armstrong became the first Indigenous person to call an AFL game on commercial radio. Subsequent appearances on AFL website programs such as *The Colour of Your Jumper* and *Yokayi Footy* caught the attention

of the ABC, and when a sports presenter role became available in 2020, they snapped him up.

"It's just been a case of happy accidents, I guess," says Armstrong of his path to Aunty, which has led to even more opportunities. In less than a year, Armstrong has co-hosted radio programs including *Grand National* with Catherine Murphy and *Breakfast with Sammy J*, hosted *Summer Offsiders* and, most recently, has been a regular sports presenter on *News Breakfast*, where he already goes by a nickname, "Mr Cuddles". The day of our chat he was excited to see how his acting debut had come across in a comedy sketch for *The Weekly with Charlie Pickering*: "Is Tony Armstrong gorgeous enough to make bad news sound good?" (Short answer, absolutely.)

Despite all these successes, there are still things that niggle. Like hearing casual racism in restaurants or the people who ask him "what percentage" he is. ("Come on, man. I'm a cup of tea. It doesn't matter how much milk's in me, you know?") And, more seriously, he is consumed by the fact that, 30 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, successive governments have failed to implement most of the 339 recommendations (sadly, at least 474 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody since the report was handed down, in 1991).

His media career may be an accident, but Armstrong carries his Aboriginality wherever he goes. "It's everything," he says. "I feel a real responsibility to keep doing everything that I'm doing and more: to increase opportunity, to increase visibility, to hopefully inspire, to kind of be the litmus test for networks so that they can trust Indigenous people behind the ink, behind the mic, in front of the camera."

"I've got an opportunity where I'm across all of those mediums, and I'm getting a really great platform. So, I'd be asleep at the wheel if I wasn't making the most of that opportunity, to try to do good things and try to progress." ●

NEWS BREAKFAST \ Weekdays 6am, ABC