



Anne-Marie joins host Anne Robinson (centre) and lexicographer Susie Dent on *Countdown*

## EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# THE NEW GIRL ON THE 'COUNTDOWN' BLOCK DR ANNE-MARIE IMAFIDON ON SWAPPING HEELS FOR TRAINERS TO STEP INTO THE FAMOUS ROLE



The mathematician has stepped in for Rachel Riley (above) while she is on maternity leave. The original numbers woman is Carol Vorderman (below), who co-hosted for 26 years



**W**ith her statement necklaces, funky trainers and striking corkscrew curls, Dr Anne-Marie Imafidon is making her mark as the new arithmetician on *Countdown*.

Yet the 32-year-old maths genius, who has joined the long-running Channel 4 game show for 60 episodes while presenter Rachel Riley is on maternity leave, reveals in this exclusive interview with **HELLO!** that even with her cool head for figures, not everything runs to plan.

"At first it felt surreal and there were moments of panic," says Anne-Marie, who at the age of 20 graduated from Oxford with a master's degree in maths and computing.

"Before she left, Rachel helpfully gave me tips such as how to stand in front of the camera, but there have been a few hitches along the way.

"Unlike Rachel, I've got big curly hair which kept covering a number on the board or blocked the audience's view of host Anne Robinson.

"And sometimes the figures don't immediately add up," continues the numbers expert, who uses mental arithmetic and a notepad (never turning to a computer) to find a solution. "Rachel explained that when this happens, I should just say: 'Leave it with me,' and work it out during the commercial break."

Anne-Marie, like Rachel, is following in the footsteps of Carol Vorderman, who co-hosted *Countdown* for 26 years after its inception in 1982.

Carol passed the baton to mathematician Rachel, who is married to former *Strictly Come Dancing* pro Pasha Kovalev and has two daughters with him – two-year-old Maven and two-month-old Noa. Rachel often checks in on her multi-talented stand-in.

"Rachel is absolutely brilliant," says Anne-

Marie. "As mathematical women, Rachel and I got to know each other at events over the years."

The distinguished academic, who holds multiple honorary doctorates, was voted the Most Influential Woman in IT in the UK in 2020 and was awarded an MBE for services to young women and Stem (science, technology, engineering and maths) sectors, may surprise *Countdown* fans when she lists what she enjoys most about her new role.

"The outfits and the lipsticks," she says. "We film five episodes a day and the fun bit is dressing up. Although Rachel's a massive fan of heels, I prefer trying out different trainers.

"The other cool part is meeting the contestants and being part of the team."

### WARM WELCOME

Singing her praises, *Countdown* host Anne tells **HELLO!**: "Anne-Marie has been a fabulous stand-in while Rachel was busy producing a lovely new daughter.

"She's brilliant at the *Countdown* numbers and, as importantly, is a great campaigner to encourage more women to choose a career in engineering."

The eldest of five children, Anne-Marie was born in East London to Professor Chris Imafidon, an ophthalmologist who emigrated from Nigeria and is the driving force behind his family's extraordinary academic success. The maths expert and her younger siblings – Christiana, now 29, Samantha, 25, and twins Peter and Paula, 22 – excelled at school. ▶

**'At first it felt surreal and there were moments of panic'**





Anne-Marie meets the Queen at a science, technology, engineering and maths (Stem) event in 2014

earning them the nickname of “Britain’s brainiest family”.

“Education was super important for my parents and if we were doing well, they were happy,” recalls Anne-Marie, who is fluent in six languages.

Yet she bore no resemblance to the stereotypical swot. “I never struggled to make friends,” she says. “There were five of us in my crew and I’d sit at the back of the class with my mates and be the class clown. I’d help other students with their coursework if they bought me lunch, and in maths when the teacher had a queue at the front for pupils who needed help, I had my own queue at the back.”

She describes her life as a student at Oxford as fun and fulfilling, but she experienced racism, too. “It’s such an interesting place,” she says. “You think that it’s all very Harry Potter and full of people like Boris Johnson, but there are many different types there.”

“One of the only times I felt like the odd one out was because I didn’t ring bells,” she laughs. “My senior tutor and a couple of students I knew

were into bell ringing, and although I grew up around the corner from Bow Bells, I’d never thought it could be a hobby.”

Sadly Anne-Marie, who as *Countdown*’s first black presenter has been targeted by racist trolls on social media, experienced prejudice in her final year. “Every morning when I visited a friend at a different college, the porter, who’d seen me many times before, would stop me from entering and insist on an ID check. When I saw how he let other students walk straight past him, I knew that he repeatedly stopped me because in his view I didn’t look like a student and shouldn’t be there. I felt it was his problem, not mine.”

#### LEADING THE WAY

Anne-Marie forged ahead, shattering glass ceilings to champion important issues along the way. Nine years ago, she founded Stemettes, an award-winning initiative dedicated to inspiring the next generation of young women in the Stem sectors, for which she received an MBE from the Prince of Wales.

Her brushes with royalty also included meeting

the Queen and the Duke of Cambridge at a technology reception at Buckingham Palace.

“I was so surprised to see the Queen,” says Anne-Marie. “When I met William, I wanted to ask him something different, so I asked him to name his favourite chocolate bar.”

An advocate for women in technology, her new book, *She’s in CTRL*, published this March, tackles how women need to take more control in technology. “Women should be making decisions in tech design,” she says. “After all, it was women who gave us the bulletproof vest, wi-fi and GPS, but their stories aren’t being told.”

Anne-Marie gives us a glimpse into her life behind the scenes. “I enjoy watching TV, and comedies, property shows and [*Great British Bake Off*] are my favourites,” she says. “I’m vegan and love cooking noodles and fried rice and live on pasta.”

“I am married,” she tells us, adding: “As for children, let’s wait and see.”

INTERVIEW: SALLY MORGAN

*Countdown* is on Channel 4 at 2.10pm every weekday.



Anne-Marie with her MBE (left) at her investiture at Buckingham Palace in 2017 and (right) in a family photo with her father Professor Chris Imafidon. Her trademark corkscrew curls (far right) have proved awkward on the *Countdown* set, “covering a number on the board” she says



**'When I met  
Prince William, I  
asked him to name  
his favourite  
chocolate bar'**

