

URGE TO MERGE

Why the industry is ripe for high-wattage deals in 2016

RESORT CHECK IN

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CASE IN POINT

Ex-Arizona Cardinal Adrian Wilson tackles the sneaker market with more stores

BOY SCOUTS

The **fall men's** shows ignited runways in London, Milan and Paris. Fearlessness and boundary-blazing prints make **Alexander McQueen, Gucci** and **Raf Simons** standouts.





The sneaker wall at the Scottsdale, Ariz., location

Forward Progress

Former NFL great Adrian Wilson will blitz the footwear industry this year with more High Point retail stores. **By Peter Verry**

For more than a decade, Adrian Wilson dominated opposing offenses on the gridiron. Now, the former Arizona Cardinals safety is bringing his style offense to sneaker fans across the country.

The five-time NFL Pro Bowl selection opened High Point Shoes in Scottsdale, Ariz., in 2008 while still a player in the league.

“When you’re playing sports growing up, you have to buy the same shoes everybody uses, [but] I never wanted to be like everybody else,” said Wilson, who retired from the NFL last April. “I always had Jordans or tried to do something as an individual. I can remember wear-

ing my first pair of [Fila] Grant Hills to school — I was 10 or 11 years old. I just had a love for it.”

Wilson’s passion for sneakers led him to start the Scottsdale shop to give locals access to styles offered in sneakerhead hotbeds like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. And High Point is heading to some of those locations, too. Wilson’s plans for 2016 include bowing stores in Austin, Texas, and New York City. Both are expected to be open as early as March.

That expansion was made possible by strong sales at the Scottsdale location. Wilson said High Point experienced 12 percent growth in 2015 and could see an additional 10 percent rise in 2016.

New collaborations are also on tap. The first will be a Valentine’s Day-themed release with Reebok. Wilson partnered with the label in November on The Duppa, which used Reebok’s iconic Ventilator silhouette. Two more collabs with yet-to-be-named brands are in the works, one for spring ’16 and the other for fall.

High Point’s top-performing brands are Nike and Vans, with Asics also providing great sell-through, said Wilson, who mainly stocks lifestyle sneakers. He estimated that 60 percent of sales are for footwear, with 40 percent from apparel and accessories.

And this year, Wilson will go the route of retailers such as Supreme

and Alife by launching a High Point apparel label, which he said he’s been working on with high-profile New York designers for roughly three years. Eventually, the private label will extend to footwear.

Even outside of High Point Shoes, Wilson has strong ties to the footwear world. The football champion is an investor in Greats Brand, a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based label that launched in August 2013.

Ryan Babenzien, founder and CEO of Greats Brand, said several celebrities and athletes had approached him about investing in the brand, but he’d declined them all until he met Wilson.

“At that point, Adrian had had High Point in operation for years and was knowledgeable as a business owner about the industry and its consumers,” Babenzien said. “He came with real value, as opposed to offering just capital and being a guy who buys lots of sneakers.”

As a gesture of appreciation, Babenzien named one of the brand’s shoes after the football player — The Wilson, a classic sport-inspired low-top silhouette.

As if all that weren’t enough to keep Wilson busy, the 36-year-old remains involved with his old football team.

Last summer, he completed an internship with the Arizona Cardinals and is now serving as a scout for the organization.

But in spite of his many obligations, Wilson said he’s still a fixture at his Scottsdale store.

“I’m in the flagship every day,” he said. “I check in to make sure the employees have everything they need. I feel that just my presence there helps uplift employees and shows them I really care about what’s going on in the store.”



Adrian Wilson



Nike and Vans selections at High Point Shoes

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF RETAILER