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'Big Daddy' now in small business
Auto repair is car buff Wilkinson's new field
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By Paul Wilson
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Kirk Irwin | Dispatch

Dan Wilkinson, who played for Ohio State, the Bengals and the Redskins, among others, has opened an AAMCO service center in Lancaster, the first of seven he plans for southern Ohio.



LANCASTER, Ohio -- After 13 years in the NFL, former Buckeye great Dan Wilkinson plans to open a string of AAMCO service centers in southern Ohio.

His inspiration? A 1970 Cadillac he bought as a teenager for \$250 and then restored.

"It was my high-school pride and joy," Wilkinson, 34, said recently at his station in Lancaster. "In the latter years of my playing career, I really looked at the automotive business."

Wilkinson opened the Lancaster operation in late October. It's the first of seven he plans in southern Ohio in the next few years; one in Chillicothe, on N. Bridge Street, is next in line.

Wilkinson said he has no partners in the projects. When all seven are open, he plans to rotate among them, possibly working at three each week.

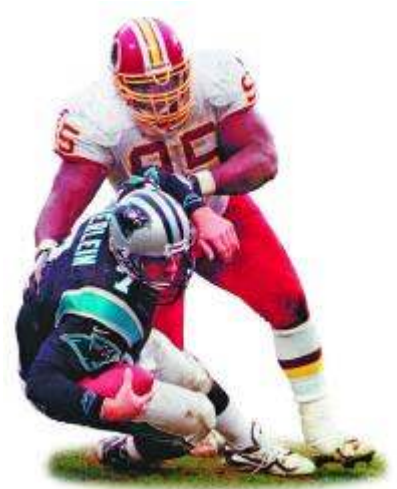
"I'm going to be involved in the first shop to the seventh shop," he said. "My involvement will be hands-on."

The former No. 1 pick in the NFL draft said he chose Ohio because it's where he grew up. But because he played for the Buckeyes and the Cincinnati Bengals, there's probably no place in the country where he is as well known -- which is important for a new business, said H. Rao Unnava, marketing professor at Ohio State University.

"Wilkinson's name carries a lot of positive connotations," Unnava said. "Therefore, the purpose of his name is as a substitute for advertising dollars.

"The attachment is emotional. Therefore, it makes people want to try the product because they have a sense of kinship."

Wilkinson, a Dayton native and Ohio State All-American, was the first pick in the 1994 draft by the Bengals, for whom he played his first four professional seasons before moving on to the Washington Redskins for five years and the Detroit Lions for three. In early 2007, his fourth team, the Miami Dolphins tried to trade him to the Denver Broncos.



But Wilkinson balked at the deal -- one reason, he said, was that he didn't want to uproot his family from its northern Virginia home -- and he didn't report to the Broncos for a physical. Miami then released Wilkinson, and he spent 2007 out of football.

Wilkinson said he isn't ruling out a return to the NFL -- under the right conditions -- but he said he is focusing on the AAMCO startups.

Wilkinson is a car fan from way back. He has bought and restored 15 to 20 vehicles, many of them Cadillacs. Among them is a 1970 model, although he no longer owns the vehicle he restored in high school. Cadillacs from 1959, '66 and '69 also sit in Wilkinson's Virginia garage.

AAMCO Transmissions, based in Horsham, Pa., has about 700 independently owned and operated shops throughout the U.S. The centers also service cooling and electrical systems and perform other maintenance.

Wilkinson's garages in Ohio will use a new AAMCO certification program geared toward making service centers more environmentally friendly. Heaters that keep the shop warm are fueled with used motor oil, and customers can buy kits that can make vehicles run on E85, a mixture of ethanol -- which is made from corn -- and gasoline.

Taking such steps is the right thing to do, Wilkinson said. In his short time as a businessman, he said, he has heard just the opposite about his competition.

"There's a lot of mistrust and talk of a lot of shady work," he said. "There's been a tremendous amount of mistrust and skepticism from the general public when it comes to automotive maintenance shops.

"My main goal is to have a professional, trustworthy shop that stands behind its work."

It's important that Wilkinson's shops prove that -- especially given his name recognition, Ohio State's Unnava said.

Unnava referred to Eddie George's Grille 27, which opened in the South Campus Gateway last year. George is known for his time with the Buckeyes and in the NFL -- not for restaurants.

Like George, Wilkinson will attract customers because of his name. But that doesn't mean they will keep coming back.

"Because people are going there just based on the emotional allegiance to him, he has to be doubly sure the expectations are met," Unnava said. "He has to really make sure that the first stores that he has are so impeccable and so well managed that they become the talk of the town."

