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Foot pain is his specialty

Killick Datta has a unique niche: saving troubled sneaker brands.

After fading into oblivion, Pony, the highflying athletic shoe once worn by hip-hop pioneers, graffiti artists, more than one-quarter of the NBA in the '70s, and marquee boxers in the '80s, is back. Trendsetting celebrities like

Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera have given the brand new visibility, but the man behind Pony's resurrection is a guy named Killick Datta.

Datta, 43, is the CEO of Global Brand Marketing Inc., a firm that's gaining notoriety in the sluggish footwear industry for bringing tired shoe brands back to life. Sales at the privately held GBMI, which purchased a majority stake in Pony earlier this year for an undisclosed amount, are expected to top \$300 million in 2003, a 100% increase over last year, says Datta. That makes GBMI one of the fastest-growing names in the footwear industry.

Since GBMI opened in 1996, right before the retro sneaker trend took hold, Datta has resuscitated Nautica footwear, launched Diesel's popular footwear line, and redesigned XOXO's line of sassy women's fashion shoes. Datta has also taken on Mecca's urban vibe and Dry-shoD, a high-end fashion footwear line, sold only in stores like Nieman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman. Typically GBMI either buys the global license for a brand or takes an ownership stake in the company, then assigns brand managers, product designers, and marketing people to the troubled shoe line. Datta says that none of his brands compete head to head, and that all the

back-office operations are centralized on a corporate level. The company now has distributors in 130 countries and gets 50% of its business from overseas. Datta owns 100% of the business. "We have not borrowed a penny," he says. "Much to my wife's horror, I used all of our personal money" to launch the business.

Datta, who was born in India and studied chemistry at Oxford University in England, has long had a foot fetish. He's a diehard sports fan and former semiprofessional soccer player who has done stints as president or head of international operations at Nike, Skechers, Wolverine Worldwide (owner of Hush Puppies), and L.A. Gear—where Datta ran its most profitable division. "Killick

is a strategic thinker with the know-how to market and position a brand," says Michael Atmore, editorial director of the Footwear Group at Fairchild Publications.

Now Datta is getting into retail: In May he opened a multibranded retail store in Santa Barbara called Global Feet, featuring more than 2,500 styles of shoes. He is planning to open four more similar stores in 2004, and is also looking to buy in on a high-end women's couture line, a beach and surf brand, and a kids' line. Pony apparel and accessories will also hit stores this spring, along with Dry-shoD's new line of pricey handbags and belts.

But while riding the retro footwear craze may seem like a pretty good gig, Datta's father and uncle, longtime board members of companies like Unilever and Glaxo Wellcome, aren't so easily impressed. "Among the many things for parents to brag about in India, selling shoes is way down on the list," Datta says. Fortunately, here it's pretty high up the list. — Kimberly L. Allers



Datta turned Pony around; now he's opening his own stores.

fame in fortune

You may recognize Adam Mesh from his stint as a suitor on NBC's *Average Joe*, a reality show in which a beautiful blond is forced to choose between average-looking guys with personality and perfect specimens with ripped abs (Mesh was the average finalist). But in the Dec. 8 finale, our curiosity was piqued when we spotted a framed FORTUNE spread on the comical Casanova's bedroom wall. Has FORTUNE paraphernalia somehow become bachelor-pad chic? Turns out we actually profiled Mesh in February 2000 at the height of the boom, when he was a mere day trader. Then in 2001 we ran a follow-up after he co-founded a trading company in New York City called Chimera Capital. Mesh says the show's producers didn't know about his FORTUNE coverage until they arrived at his Manhattan apartment. "We never really talked about work at all," says Mesh. "All of a sudden they make a big deal about the fact that I did well and all this stuff."

Chimera, which now has over 30 employees, is still going strong, and Mesh says business wasn't hurt by his two-month absence to film the show in Palm Springs. Plus, his five partners agreed to split any winnings (they didn't know what kind of show it was) in exchange for Mesh's take of Chimera profits while he was gone. He may not have a six pack, but at least our *Average Joe* has something to fall back on. — Kate Bonamicci

Adam Mesh:
He's no himbo.

