

Wilson still 'shocked' by release from Als

'Mind-boggling' move, veteran says

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Although a month has passed since he was released by the Alouettes, the sting and shock behind the move remains prevalent in the mind of Eric Wilson.

In an exclusive interview with The Gazette, the veteran defensive tackle admitted he didn't see the move coming.

"When I left last November, I had no inkling. In January, I was preparing to go back to Montreal and play one last year," the 34-year-old said from his winter home in Westchester, N.Y. — the first time he has spoken to anyone from the media. "This is a shock to me. I had no clue.

"They made their decision and this is the direction in which they're headed. It's part of the game," Wilson added. "But I'm shocked things went down like that."

Although The Gazette reported the possibility of Wilson's release earlier this winter, it wasn't until Feb. 14 that the Als confirmed the move in a written statement — coming on the same day the team announced the re-signing of potential free-agent guard Scott

Flory. Since then, in a series of emails with The Gazette, Wilson confirmed he would talk, eventually, once he felt more comfortable discussing the scenario. Throughout the conversation, he reiterated his desire to express his side of the story, and the respect he was seeking.

"I wanted to leave with respect. I always did what was asked," Wilson said. "I was the sixth offensive-line man, the fullback on short-yardage, the wedge of kick returns. This is mind-boggling.

"I understand the football aspect, the salary cap and the fact you're getting older," said Wilson, who received an annual salary of more than \$100,000. "But I did an amazing job for what I was asked."

Wilson's worth to the Als goes beyond statistics. Indeed, his numbers last season would appear modest. In 17 games, he had 12 tackles and one quarterback sack. He also recovered one fumble.

But after he was made a healthy scratch for a Labour Day game at Hamilton — one the Als lost, 44-21 — head coach Marc Trestman admitted it was a mistake to have benched the 6-foot-4, 300-pound Wilson. Coincidentally, the Tiger-Cats rushed for 144 yards in the game, including 102 yards alone by Avon Cobourne, who scored two touchdowns.



MIKE CASSESE REUTERS FILE PHOTO

"I wanted to leave with respect. I always did what was asked," former Alouette Eric Wilson says after his release.

Montreal struggled on defence in 2011, but not against the run. The Als allowed a league-low average of 92.4 yards per game. Wilson was at the heart of stopping the run, often being double-teamed in the process. This allowed others, usually rush-ends John Bowman or Anwar Stewart — the latter subsequently released before Wilson — to put pressure on the quarterback.

"My position isn't based on stats," Wilson said. "We're all adults and understand changes eventually come. But I could truthfully stand in front of any coach or the gen-

eral manager. I took on two to allow (others) to succeed. I was the sacrificial lamb. I did what was asked. I didn't play the game and say I needed numbers.

"It should have been brought to my attention and they should have changed the scheme," he added. "But it was never brought to my attention during the year that I needed to do more."

Contrary to popular belief, Wilson isn't departing with animosity and speaks highly of the organization and GM Jim Popp. It was Popp who signed him as a free agent in June 2007, following his re-

lease by Saskatchewan. Wilson broke into the Canadian Football League with Winnipeg in 2002. He spent three seasons with the Blue Bombers, wrapped around a two-year stint with the Miami Dolphins.

Popp had nothing but praise for Wilson following his release, calling him a "tremendous player and leader."

In five seasons with the Als, Wilson had 54 defensive tackles. He played in three Grey Cups, winning two.

Wilson still hopes to play one season with another CFL team. His agents, Paul Sheehy and Warren Schmidt, have started making calls, but Wilson won't allow the process to drag on indefinitely. If he's done playing, Wilson will return to the University of Michigan, his alma mater, working as a defensive-line coach at summer camp. He's also considering becoming certified as a player agent.

Note: This month, Pete Rousel of CoachingSearch.com reported Matt Sheldon will be named the Als' linebacker coach. Sheldon is a former assistant defensive backs coach with the Minnesota Vikings. He also has NFL coaching experience with Buffalo and St. Louis.

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