

Zaid Osman on his sneaker hustle turned roaring success

By Lauren Hartzenberg

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Entrepreneur and social innovator Zaid Osman is one of the driving forces behind South Africa's vibrant sneaker culture. Five years ago he held his first Sneaker Exchange event purely as a means to fund a business venture. Since then the sneaker trading event has taken on a life of its own, drawing thousands of like-minded footwear connoisseurs in search of their next prized pair of kicks.



Zaid Osman

Osman may have spent his formative years growing up in the U.S, but he has his sights set firmly on Africa, not only with Sneaker Exchange but through his latest project Grade Africa, a new online fashion and footwear platform.

In the spirit of [#YouthMonth](#), the successful twenty-something chats entrepreneurship, sneaker culture and future plans.

■ Where did your passion for sneakers begin?

It began while I was still living in the States. I got a lot of the influence from my older brother, he was always into sneakers. This was around 2004/5, when there was a lot of the Air Force 1s releasing every week in a different colourway, and Jordans. I could never afford it, so I just admired it.

Then a few years later I started hustling by cutting grass, ploughing snow, and then started buying my own pairs off online sneaker forums, from factory outlets and sale racks. Then I would trade them and always try to 'level up'.

■ How did Sneaker Exchange come about, and what are the mechanics behind it?

It started in 2013. I was 20 years old, and needed to sell a lot of my personal shoes to fund my sneaker store, Lost Property. After the first event, I saw that there was real potential for this event to grow. I got my partner Tebogo on board and took it to the next level; the event is now Africa's biggest sneaker event.

Sneaker Exchange allows people, local and international brands, sneaker resellers and retailers to sell their product at the event. Then there is also a platform where some of the country's best artists perform at the event.

■ How has Sneaker Exchange grown since inception, and what is your ultimate vision for the event?

The event started with about 80 people and now brings in crowds of over 4,000. The ultimate vision is to take the event all across the country and inspire kids on all parts of the continent.

■ What are your most prized pair of kicks?

Honestly, I used to have a lot more sneakers and prized them a lot more. But there are still a few pairs in my collection that I just can't seem to get rid of. At the moment, I'm starting to like Converse, Vans and Doc Martins a lot more. My favourite pair at the moment is probably my Doc Martin x Off White pair - I got them earlier this year in Dubai.



■ You also founded sneaker boutique Lost Property. Can you share some of the highlights and challenges of your retail journey?

Lost Property (LP) was pretty much what started it all. It was always a place where people could get the uber rare sneakers – stuff that never really released in South Africa. When it was started, it was one of the only places where people could get what they really wanted or saw on music videos, basketball players, etc.

Eventually, it got to a point where brands wanted to start stocking LP. With very little retail experience you don't quite know how to run it, but then after running into arrears with accounts, you learn from it and overcome the challenges. Then, I got to a point where I was tired of constantly importing rare sneakers from different parts of the world. I want to create something that is truly African and something that we can export to the rest of the world.

That's where Grade Africa came to light. It's a platform that promotes local African products as well as key international brands. Check out GradeAfrica.com for more info, aaaand feel free to buy something :)



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■ Which personal qualities do you think have contributed to your success at such a young age, and to what/whom do you owe your entrepreneurial spirit?

My grandfather was an entrepreneur. Unfortunately, I didn't get to meet him as he passed away when I was 1 years old. I'm always on a hustle; from a young age my parents pretty much told me that I can have anything in the world, but I would need to work for it.



Osman and business partner Tebogo Mbola.

■■ **What do you love most about South Africa's community of sneakerheads?**

The community is growing, and always open to learning about sneaker culture and is on par with international releases.

■■ **What's next for Zaid Osman?**

Good question. Maaaaybe I'll come out with my own shoes or become a rapper or something.

Connect with Zaid Osman on [Instagram](#), keep up to date with Sneaker Exchange developments on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#), and visit [Grade Africa online](#) for more info.

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