

Sanitation

MIGHT SAVE YOUR SEASON

Keep your athletes safe by maintaining cleanliness in your facilities

HAVING A CLEAN and sanitized locker room is critical to the health of your athletes. *Photo courtesy of Wenger Corp.*

By **MICHAEL AUSTIN**, Senior Editor

In September 2009, a high school football player at Big Spring High School (Pa.) was diagnosed with a staphylococcus (staph) infection. Taking the necessary precautions, the school district halted all football-related activities for 72 hours, including practices and pushed back the team's game from Friday night until the following Monday. School officials worked diligently to sanitize the fitness center and football equipment. While a good procedure, it was too little too late as the infection made its way through the team.

Subsequently, 18 players became infected with staph infection and the game against Hanover, which already had been pushed back three days, now was canceled for the safety of all players involved.

“High school and college athletic and training facilities are not doing enough to sanitize their equipment...”

The affected players took the prescribed antibiotics and were cleared to play football the following week. However, as is the case across the country, could this incident been avoided had necessary precautions been taken earlier? Are high schools and colleges doing enough to protect their athletes inside locker rooms and in weight rooms? Is equipment being properly handled and cleaned each day? So far, the answer appears to be “no.”

“From my experience, high school and college athletic training facilities are not doing enough to sanitize their equipment and provide the safest possible environment for their student-athletes,” claims Dr. Bruce A. Sherman, Ph.D., an exercise physiologist and president of GymValet. “I have personal contact and communicate with strength-and-conditioning coaches, athletic trainers and athletic directors. I have heard every excuse in the world why user-to-user equipment sanitizing is not possible or practical in athletic facilities. It’s time to stop the excuses – read the headlines and research, and affect a change in your equipment-sanitizing policies.”

In fact, the problem has become so widespread, it even affects professional locker rooms.

The *New England Journal of Medicine* reported in February 2005 on a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study focused on the locker room of the St. Louis Rams, which, during the 2003 season, was the home to eight



THE GYMVALET makes access to cleaning products easy and convenient.

MRSA infections (Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus, which is a bacterial infection that is highly resistant to some antibiotics). The eight infections affected five players during the three months of the study. Those five players missed 17 total days of work, including practices and games.

While athletic facilities at all levels of competition are not immune to these problems, there are some effective and unique ways to protect your players. It comes down to keeping your equipment and facility clean, as well as having what might be an awkward conversation with your athletes about their own hygiene.

Clean Equipment & Facilities

Keeping your facility and equipment clean takes more than just wiping a damp cloth over everything once a week. It involves dedicating time and effort to an otherwise thankless position. And, it involves making sure you have the proper products on hand to do the job.

Offering much more than a dirty rag to wipe down equipment, several companies are manufacturing effective wiping materials that are an easy, quick way to combat whatever is growing on your weight-room equipment, wrestling mat or in your locker room.

Mueller Sports Medicine offers its Whizzer Cleaner and Disinfectant, as well as its Sani-Cloth Plus Germicidal wipes for programs needing a strong counter to the germs and bacteria living in weight rooms and locker rooms. Whizzer, a highly concentrated disinfectant, is registered by the EPA to kill MRSA, HIV-1, Hepatitis B and C and fungus germs on contact, according to Jake Jacobson, a certified athletic trainer and Mueller sales representative, who also says that, “it has been recently noted that Whizzer is effective on the 2009 H1N1 flu strain, as well as other influenza A-virus strains on hard, non-porous surfaces.”

Mueller's Sani-Cloth Plus Germicidal wipes are pre-moistened cloths that contain a powerful disinfectant and Cavicide disinfectant that also are effective on H1N1, says Ginger Mueller-Mann, vice president of the Western region for Mueller.

2XL Corp. offers a full range of GymWipes, which are pre-moistened, disposable, surface-disinfecting wipes that sanitize fitness surfaces and kill germs that potentially cause illnesses. The company's latest offering, FORCE, is an EPA-registered disinfectant wipe that is effective against MRSA, CA-MRSA (Community Associated), salmonella, staph, VRE, VISA, Hepatitis B and C, HIV, Influenza A...46 pathogens in all, according to Linda Giammanco of 2XL. “Additionally, the EPA believes, based on available scientific information, that the currently registered Influenza A virus products will be effective against the H1N1 virus and other influenza flu strains on hard, non-porous surfaces,” Giammanco adds.

Convenience is an important factor in the effectiveness of all kinds of wiping products, which is also the idea



GYMWIPES, from 2XL Corp., are effective against 46 pathogens.

behind the GymValet. The GymValet is a holder for disinfectant spray bottles and towels that attaches directly to strength and cardio equipment. “Convenient access to equipment-sanitizing supplies is the best, first line of primary prevention against germ and virus transmission,” says Sherman. “Enforcing cleaning rules to your athletes is much easier when the cleaning supplies are within arm’s reach.”

While the aforementioned products work well on cleaning surfaces, disinfecting sweaty equipment, such as football pads or helmets, takes a different approach. Sports-O-Zone uses Smart Technology™ within its ozone-safety system to



SPORTS-O-ZONE is an ozone-safety system used to disinfect equipment.

track and monitor ozone levels and to record data about the bacteria levels on equipment. The Sports-O-Zone is an easy way to disinfect equipment as you simply load the equipment into the machine and it does the rest. This piece of equipment achieves a greater than 99.9 percent kill rate on MRSA and staph. The cabinet locks securely when in use and achieves a high level of sanitization without the added use of sprays during or after the use of the machine.

The Wenger Corporation concentrates on methods and strategies to keep an entire facility clean. Wenger helps athletic directors and administrators design efficient locker rooms, weight rooms and storage areas. All Wenger designs focus on placing equipment on wheels (via its Gearboss system), so everything in a room can be easily moved out of the room for effective cleaning and sanitization.

“A room needs to be designed to be cleanable from corner to corner and from floor to ceiling. You need to be able to pull everything out of a room to sanitize it completely. One of the main problems with today’s athletic facilities is that they are built with uncleanable areas... like with furniture you can’t get behind or in between, or with traditional lockers that are breeding grounds for dirt. These areas become ripe for growth and microorganisms,” says Gregg Nelson of Wenger.

Nelson also adds that your locker room, weight room and storage areas should be given a prime location and not placed wherever they might be out of the way. Typically, schools create storage areas in basements with no air flow. That stale air doesn’t allow equipment to dry completely, which also is a major problem when it comes to growth in these areas. “And, many locker rooms are built right next to the shower areas. This is a terrible idea because moisture always is present.”

Clean Athletes

Of course, you can have the cleanest equipment and most sanitized facility and, if your players aren’t doing their part, all

of your efforts are being wasted. You might be surprised to learn that athletes hold the key to the well being of your entire athletic department.

“The problem is that this generation of students and athletes aren’t showering,” explains Jacobson. “MRSA lives on the skin. Because so many players use a spray-on deodorant or body spray, and then get into their street clothes, they’re not helping stop the spread at all. High schools are doing quite a bit...but coaches don’t always have the ability to force the kids to shower.”

“We consider each part of the equation like a sandbag stopping a flood. You can have a clean facility and equipment, but if your players aren’t clean, then you have a break in your levy. Increase your discussions with your athletes on their own, personal hygiene,” adds Nelson.

Sure, it’s not a comfortable situation, as a coach, trainer or athletic director, to approach a student about his or her hygiene, but the consequences are much greater than the small amount of embarrassment.

One additional way for your athletes to stay clean in the locker-room setting is to wear protective footwear, such as the

LOCKER ROOM HYGIENE GUIDELINES

COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY recently revised its athletic training department policy and procedure manual. It offers some guidelines about proper locker room hygiene. Here are some of the highlights to consider within your athletic program:

- **Encourage good player hygiene (e.g. keeping hands clean by washing with soap and water or using an antibacterial hand sanitizer).**
- **Teach players to avoid sharing towels, razors or other personal items that come into contact with bare skin, use a barrier (e.g. clothing or towel) between their skin and shared equipment such as weight-training benches, and inform athletic training staff about active skin infections.**
- **Treat those with active infection with appropriate first aid techniques.**
- **Follow MRSA infection guidelines for active MRSA infections.**
- **Practice appropriate hand hygiene.**
- **Implement a system to ensure adequate wound care and to cover skin lesions appropriately before play.**
- **Use a disinfectant in the locker room area to help the spread of bacteria – this can be done in the form of a spray, liquid solution or fogger into the locker rooms.**

latest offering from Crocs, which is the Prepair recovery shoe. Prepair shoes are produced with a therapeutically designed foot bed that features silver in it. The silver, which is an idea borrowed from Crocs medical shoes, helps kill bacteria and fungus. "These shoes offer another layer of protection for your athletes," says Eddie Scott, general manager of professional footwear for Crocs. "We saw people wearing our standard Crocs after marathons and after football games. They were using them as recovery shoes. So, we thought, why not create an athletic recovery shoe with extra benefits like helping to prevent the athlete from catching athlete's foot or a staph infection."



PREPAIR SHOES FROM CROCS are made with silver, which acts as a protector against bacteria and fungus.

As another layer of protection, make sure your staff is doing everything it can to keep the athlete's uniforms and apparel clean.

"We wash everything as soon as possible," says Donald Barnes, the director of equipment operations at the University of Missouri. "Even if we have a night game on the road and don't return until 4 a.m., we immediately start washing upon our arrival. You have to be proactive when it comes to this...it seems like too many schools are reactive."

Barnes did acknowledge that most high schools, as well as lower-division colleges, aren't going to have the budget and staff to clean every piece of clothing immediately. However, it's not an excuse to outfit athletes in unclean uniforms, practice gear or with dirty towels.

"Even if you only have a couple of washers and dryers, have them running all the time. If you have limited staff, use the students in your school. There are a lot of students who want to be a part of your program. Make these students equipment managers and have them be in charge of washing everything. It's not a glamorous job but an important one. So, treat these students as such. Give them a letter, a jacket or an award at your year-end banquet. Acknowledge the importance of their work."

Making Sanitation A Priority

Barnes added that schools that do not have a washer or dryer need to make it a priority over something like new uniforms. "It's a fundamental thing. Your uniforms are going to last longer and have a lesser chance of being destroyed if you and your staff are washing them consistently. You are going to get more life out of your uniforms by washing and drying them on-site."

Mueller-Mann agrees that schools need to find the money to make sanitation a priority. "It's really a staffing problem. Actually, a budget problem that leads to reduced staffing, which in turn, creates a lack of time to really focus on this. The janitorial focus may not be as good as it should be because the staff has been cut. They're willing to spin the roulette wheel and see if the outbreak misses them."

Nelson says the cost easily is offset by reducing the school's liability if and when there is an outbreak. "You need to limit your liability. If a player loses a senior season due to a staph problem or loses a potential scholarship because he or she becomes ill due to problems with your gear, then you could be found liable and have a big-time money issue on your hands."

Sherman believes the problem involves staff not wanting to put in the time to keep their facilities clean, rather than the cost to do so. "I have had strength and conditioning coaches tell me that there is no time available during their athletes' weight training sessions to clean and sanitize equipment," he reports. "You don't have a few seconds to potentially prevent your athletes from contacting germ-affected surfaces during their workout? Invest a few seconds to protect your (school's) investment in its student-athletes. Sick and infected athletes do your program no good."

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