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### **About the Author**

*A retired high school teacher and college football coach, Steve Leib knows first hand the threat MRSA poses to student-athletes and athletic programs. Now, as national sales manager at Sports Laundry Systems, in Oshkosh, Wis., he shares his knowledge of MRSA prevention, which includes the use of “disinfecting” laundry equipment.*

By Steve Leib

## **The Cruel Reality of MRSA & Student-Athletes**

### *Thwarting MRSA Infection in the Wash*

Staph and MRSA outbreaks among student-athletes are a major concern for colleges and universities. Staph bacteria, and MRSA, an antibiotic-resistant strain of staph, have migrated from hospital settings, where they are commonplace, into locker rooms and athletic facilities – infecting high school, college and professional athletes. Highly contagious, MRSA in particular can be difficult to treat and easily spread from person-to-person or surface-to-person. Key to a healthy athletic program are healthy student-athletes. Thus, infection prevention is critical.

### **Preventing MRSA/Staph Infections**

How best does a college or university prevent the spread of MRSA and staph? While hand washing, good hygiene, clean surfaces and bandaged wounds are important, so is properly cleaned and disinfected laundry, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Prompt cleaning and disinfection of all soiled laundry – towels, loops, clothing and uniforms – stops infection. Unfortunately, many colleges and universities don't use the right laundry equipment. Laundry solutions should be clinically proven to disinfect and kill bacteria, viruses and superbugs, like MRSA, in the wash.

### **Stopping Infection in the Wash**

With player safety in mind, T-Joe Breaux, assistant athletic director and equipment manager at Rice University, recently installed a Sports Laundry System, which teams high-speed washer-extractors, ozone injection and commercial drying tumblers to achieve disinfection. It works by

infusing a validated amount of ozone gas into the wash cycle at exactly the right time, water temperature and water level. The amount of ozone infused automatically adjusts according to the soil level of each laundry load – maintaining enough ozone to achieve disinfection and kill more than 99 percent of the bacteria and viruses in the wash.

“Player safety is my number one priority,” said Breaux. “This extends beyond helmets, pads and cleats. Locker rooms are close-knit and it takes just one contaminated piece of laundry to spread infection. If you don’t have a laundry system that disinfects, you are taking a risk.”

### **MRSA Can Destroy an Athlete and/or Athletic Program**

Athletes with MRSA infections generally stay infected for just under 10 days, according to the MRSA Research Center at the University of Chicago Medical Center. During that time, they cannot practice or play in games. When antibiotics don’t control staph and MRSA infections, other serious complications can occur.

Staph has taken down many healthy and strong athletes, according to Ric Bucher, of “ESPN The Magazine.” These players include MLB slugger Sammy Sosa and White Sox outfielder Alex Ríos; and NBA players such as Grizzlies forward Rudy Gay, Rockets forward Shane Battier, and Nuggets forward Kenyon Martin. “Staph has killed high school and college football players – including Ricky Lannetti, a record-setting Division III wideout – and ended the careers of pros such as Redskins defensive lineman Brandon Noble and Browns wide receiver Joe Jurevicius and All-Pro center LeCharles Bentley.”

More recently, MRSA reared its ugly head at Steinert High School in Hamilton Township, near Trenton, N.J. The outbreak struck 11 students and put three in the hospital, according to CBS. “Dr. Seth Rosenbaum, an infectious diseases specialist, explained that MRSA can be contracted when ‘Someone shares a towel, someone shares sporting equipment [or] a piece of apparatus that’s been infected with the bacteria.’” That’s why the laundry component of infection prevention is so important.

### **Choosing the Right Laundry Equipment**

Does it Disinfect?

When colleges and universities look for laundry equipment, they should consider the most important aspect – disinfection – first and foremost. Is the laundry equipment clinically proven to disinfect and kill bacteria and viruses? If it isn't, keep looking.

### Is it Highly Programmable?

Second, seek a laundry solution that offers solid programmability and automatic chemical injection. Here's why ... Once individual programs are set up for cleaning towels, uniforms, loops and practice gear, users just load the washer, select the appropriate program number and press start. The washer and ozone injection tower should handle the rest automatically. Thus, every time a load of uniforms is washed, it is cleaned exactly the same way no matter who is operating the washer. This reduces human error and eliminates damage to expensive uniforms and fabrics.

### Does it Validate Ozone & Disinfection?

Because ozone infusion is critical to attaining disinfection, ensure the laundry solution you purchase validates the levels of ozone in the wash. In other words, be sure it automatically adjusts ozone levels according to the soil content of the load *and* validates that disinfection is achieved.

### Is it Productive?

Look for productivity. You don't want contaminated laundry piling up. By properly sizing laundry equipment to match productivity needs, colleges will easily keep pace with dirty laundry. Look for washers with extract speeds reaching 380 plus G-force. As a washer's extract speed increases, so does the amount of water removed from every load, which shortens resulting dry time and improves productivity. Many uniforms shouldn't be dried in the first place. When they come out of a high-speed washer, they'll line dry very quickly, which is important.

### Is it Efficient?

Finally, remember that there are very efficient laundry solutions out there. Some can cut water usage by up to 50 percent and hot water usage by 30 percent. Keep in mind that when you cut hot water usage, you decrease natural gas consumption and resulting costs, as well. An efficient system will give you a much quicker return on your investment. Plus, it's good for our world.

## **Employing Best Practices in Infection Prevention**

Colleges and universities must strive to prevent the spread of infection among student-athletes by embracing every possible prevention technique. While your institution is likely practicing many methods for infection prevention, is the disinfection of athletic laundry among them?

To find out more about MRSA and its prevention, visit <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>.