

Laundry in the NFL: Yes, it gets dirty

Equipment managers look for best ways to remove uniform stains, prevent yellowing

BY MATT POE, EDITOR

CHICAGO — As the NFL winds down the regular season and heads into the playoffs, most people are focused on which teams will be in the hunt—and who has the best chance to win the Super Bowl.

Folks in the laundry and linen services industry, on the other hand, might notice that even after a full season of grass, dirt and blood stains, the teams' uniforms still have bright colors and gleaming whites.

That's because each team has an equipment manager who, in addition to maintaining all of the other gear, makes sure a team's uniforms are spotless throughout the season.

"The game uniform is where you really take your time to have pride in it because that's what's seen on your biggest stage," says Chris Valenti, equipment manager for the Denver Broncos, which won Super Bowl 51 last year.

And it's not just grass and dirt and blood. Some stadium field maintenance personnel paint their fields green to look brighter on television, which is yet another stain to deal with.

One might assume that teams have a new uniform for every game, and they do use special uniforms, like historic throwback uniforms, for special games. The reality is, however, they wear the same uniforms, either a home or away version, most games.

"That's our job," says Steve Urbaniak, equipment manager for the San Francisco 49ers. "So that every game, it looks like the players are coming out there in a new uniform, even though they've worn the same one for maybe eight games."

While it seems like the state of uniforms would be the last thing on the minds of the players and coaches, it does get noticed.

"When I knew the head coach was unhappy that things were yellow, I worried about it," says Allen Wright, equipment manager for the Kansas City Chiefs. "I lost sleep over it. He had only been my boss for a month, and the first thing he had said was, 'Why are things so yellow?' To be able to hit a home run right with the very first thing that I dealt with our head coach was extremely important to me."

Teams like the Broncos, 49ers and Chiefs

use commercial on-premises laundry (OPL) equipment. Often, though, it isn't the washers and dryers that create an issue with the uniform—it's the chemicals used.

"We were finding our reds were fading really fast, and the whites started to yellow," Urbaniak says. "We had to really struggle getting it clean. What we were using, it just faded again faster and the whites got dingier and yellower really quick."

"The stains we get on the white pants are probably the biggest concern," Valenti says. "It's always been the bane, if you will, for me, getting those grass stains out of the pants."

All three teams turned to the Tide Professional Laundry system to help get out the stains and remove yellowing.

"We brought in a few different systems, one of them being the Tide system, and we knew after we did the first load that there was a difference," Wright says.

So, how does a laundry supplier like Tide Professional Laundry become part of an NFL team?

"The process for working with NFL teams is very similar to how we work with all new customers," says Renee Buchanan, communications manager for P&G Professional. "We identify the top laundry and cleaning needs of the customer, in this case a professional football team, and then we set a meeting with the equipment manager to discuss the issues they may be having and what we can do to help."

She says that in many cases, the company is referred by another customer (or team in this case) who is already using the system.

"The NFL equipment manager group is a small network of people who like to help each other out and often pass along recommendations to each other," she says. "In other cases, equipment managers may contact us because they are having problems with their current products and/or systems and we come in to help them."

Valenti says Denver has a "tricky issue" because the water at the Broncos facility is extremely hard.

Buchanan says the company works closely with the equipment managers to identify not only the issues, but how to ensure the laundry system works best with the material being laundered, taking into account regional factors, such as water quality.



Denver's equipment manager, Chris Valenti, loads towels used by Broncos players. (Photos: P&G Professional)



Employees in the Chiefs laundry room load soiled gear gathered from the locker room.



Steven Urbaniak, equipment manager for the 49ers, tracks down gear for players.

"We create a custom solution for each team to keep them happy and help ensure the players feel their best when taking the

field," she says. "We are honored to be a part of the NFL, even if it is behind the scenes." ALN

FD Q&A

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100% for firefighting gear and our hoses, and it has provided many benefits. The greatest benefit is that it is helping more than our department. Other fire departments are bringing their gear to us to be cleaned. It has been a great aid to them, because within one day their gear is cleaned and dried, and many of these are volunteer fire stations.

Additionally, the gear is placed back into service so much quicker

than it was. This has been a big difference. We also use the drying cabinet for the fire hose. It is decontaminated outside and then we place it on the shelf of the cabinet. Previously, it would have to dry outside for a few days, and now it is back in service significantly faster.

Another benefit is the washer-extractor decontaminates blood-borne pathogens, which is something we did not have before. There is a separate cycle for the decontamination of blood-borne pathogens, which we are exposed to and respond to frequently, and that cycle is followed up by a normal wash cycle.

Since purchasing the equipment, have you been in contact with other fire departments (or other laundries) wanting to hear about your experience?

Ray: Yes, we have had two fire departments in our county that have come out to look at our equipment. We have also shared our grant narrative so that they can apply for similar opportunities. One of the departments recently received the grant; the other is still pending on the federal level.

Additionally, numerous fire personnel have asked about the equipment and I've spoken to them in

detail about how the equipment is used and how important it is.

If you could share some of your experience with other fire department laundries, what would you tell them?

Ray: First, I would tell them the importance of doing everything we can as fire chiefs and public safety directors to provide safety for our personnel, and to try to protect them from unnecessary exposures as best as we can. This is one of the areas we can improve on as a fire service to make sure our personnel have better protection from dangerous chemicals.

The danger we face in this job is every day. It's a normal part of our job to face these dangers, especially by-products of combustion and fire, so we need to step up and find better ways to protect our personnel since we know that these dangers are there.

Additionally, the minimal expense of purchasing the equipment compared to the benefits it provides for decontamination is incomparable. Agencies and departments need to be creative to find other grant and funding opportunities outside of normal income to make these types of projects happen. ALN