

GYM-CLASS RITUAL FADING AWAY

AT MOST SCHOOLS, SHOWERS STAY DRY



PHOTOS BY JOE BURBANK/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Tim Locksmith, right, and other students use skin wipes during wrestling practice at Osceola High in Kissimmee. In recent years, more students are opting for wipes instead of taking showers at school.



By **Denise-Marie Balona** | STAFF WRITER

Today's teens aren't shocked by much. They don't blink an eye when they spot a kid with drugs or a classmate with a baby. It's not that big a deal anymore if guys or girls dye their hair pink and pierce their faces.

But the idea of getting naked to shower after gym class? No way, José.

Eyes bulge at the mere mention of showering around other students, which was common — mandatory, even — in middle schools and high schools across the country just a decade or two ago.

"I wouldn't do it," said 16-year-old Adrian Alequin, a junior at Winter Park High School. "It's way too weird. I don't want to see another guy like that."

Today, students generally have the option of stripping down to wash off the sweat and grime after workouts in the hot Florida sun. Most of the time, though, they don't.

Even after hours of sports practice and rigorous competitions, many kids wait to bathe at home.

Boone High football and track star Marvin Bracy is one of them.

*Please turn to **SHOWERS, A16***

Last semester, Marvin skipped showers after his twice-a-day gym classes, preferring instead to freshen up with a washcloth and a dousing of BOD Man body spray. After practice in the afternoons, Marvin said, he goes straight home.

"I just don't feel comfortable around all of those people — they play too much," he said.

It might seem odd that teens, who are notoriously self-conscious, would forgo a quick rinse to keep from stinking in class. But veteran educators explain that the behavior isn't that unusual in an era when people of all ages are becoming more concerned about their privacy.

New airport body scanners can now see through your clothing. Companies — and governments — can share all-too-intimate details about you.

And though people may not be able to control those invasive forces, they can exert pressure over school rules they do not like.

The result: Parents, who have their own horror stories about showering in front of their peers and undergoing shower inspections by gym teachers, have pushed for an end to the practice. And school districts, worried about lawsuits and other problems, have given in.

In some cases, school officials have even begun discouraging showers.

In the early 1990s, the Hollidaysburg school district in Pennsylvania drew national attention after the American Civil Liberties Union threatened to sue over its shower rule. A girl there got in trouble for refusing to open her towel so a gym teacher could make

sure she wasn't wearing underwear into the shower:

Attorney David Millstein, who took the case on behalf of the ACLU, said the issue struck a nerve in communities far and wide.

"Of all the cases I've ever done with the ACLU, this is the one case I got the most reaction from," he said while vacationing in Naples, Fla., during the holidays. "It was my belief that unless a student smelled and was drawing flies, it wasn't the school's business."

Some athletic coaches and health advocates have expressed concerns, however; about allowing teens to forgo bathing after playing sports, especially those involving a lot of skin-to-skin contact.

Cheryl Richardson, a program manager with the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, worries about the spread of infectious diseases such as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA, which can be deadly.

Instead of washing off the bacteria in the shower, Richardson said kids might transfer it to their street clothes or, even worse, their winter coats and gloves — which don't tend to be cleaned as often.

"There are all sorts of issues related to this," she said. "It would be so much easier if kids would take a shower."

Jim Bird, the head wrestling coach at Osceola High in Kissimmee, said he scares his wrestlers into taking showers — or at least cleaning up with antiseptic wipes — by showing photographs of skin infections that can result from poor hygiene.

"If you show them the pictures of a staph infection, ringworm or impetigo, they're a lot more likely to take a shower," Bird said. "You have to trick them sometimes."

A Maryland-based company called My Kids Stink started selling a product this year specifically to meet the needs of students, some of whom might skip the showers because they're pressed for time or don't have towels at school.

Harvey Metro, an accountant and father of three boys, came up with the idea for the large QwikShower Wipes because his kids — all athletes — didn't shower at school. And they reeked.

"It was just kind of gross," said Metro, himself a frequent user of school showers growing up. "I don't know how they walked around school like that."

Metro is donating a portion of his sales to schools, which is why groups such as the Fort Lauderdale High School PTA and the Naples High School booster club have begun promoting the 10-inch-by-12-inch wipes, he said.

Danielle Ardines, 16, said the girls at her school have their own way to stave off body odor, which they seem to do better than the boys, she said.

"Change your shirt and lots of perfume," said the Winter Park High student, adding that the Japanese Cherry Blossom line of lotions and sprays from Bath & Body Works also does the trick.

Danielle's friend Adrian Alequin said he will bathe at school if he has to work out particularly hard several times in a single day as part of his ROTC military-training program.

But only if he wears a bathing suit or boxer shorts.

"Well, we're not going to go naked," said Adrian, stunned anyone would suggest otherwise.

Lake Mary High's athletic director, Doug Peters, said he once contemplated turning the locker-room shower area into a sports room because it's so rarely used. He hasn't seen a kid use the showers in years, he said.

"You can't force a kid to go take a shower," Peters said. "They prefer, quite honestly, to take one when they get home, and I trust that they do. Trust and hope."

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