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A stinky problem means a big opportunity

By Stacey Burling
Inquirer Staff Writer

It is soccer season, which means that millions of families are coping with early weekend games, fragile egos, and a smell so vile that words can barely do it justice - the smell of soccer cleats and shin guards cured in wet grass and sweat.

Some exude an odor remarkably like one of the most repulsively acrid, tenacious scents on earth: cat urine. Others, said one dad, are more like rotting vegetables.

Or worse.

"I called the exterminator," confessed Diane Price, of Upper Dublin, as she sat on the sidelines at the Al Perlini Soccer Tournament in Montgomery County this month. One of her three soccer-playing sons was on the field. "I thought there was a dead mouse in my garage, and it turned out to be the shoes."

A quest to find the source of this awful scent, and a solution for it, quickly devolved into a game of pass-the-buck: It's the growing popularity of synthetic shoes. No, it's the leather. It's the kids; some of them just smell. It's the parents, who don't take care of the shoes or the kids.

Finally, two experts on sweat - George Preti, a chemist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center, and James Leyden, an emeritus professor of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania - shed some light. The source of the nasty smell in cat urine is volatile sulfur compounds. Bacteria that colonize some people's feet also produce sulfur compounds. What you think it smells like depends on your experiences, Leyden said, but it is "almost universally perceived as offensive."

Whether some shoes make the problem worse they couldn't say, but the bacteria thrive where it's wet.

This stinky-shoe situation is a great example of what Richard Lancioni, chair of Temple University's marketing department, calls "unrecognized need." Shoe manufacturers may put tons of research into producing lighter, faster shoes without worrying enough about what happens when their technology meets adolescent perspiration.

Voila. A chance to make money.

Some entrepreneurs, including a pair of New Jersey soccer moms and giant Procter & Gamble, have recently tackled the problem. Athletic stores say they're seeing more built-in antimicrobial treatments in shoes. Hockey and football uniforms are also big olfactory offenders. Some hockey bags now include fans to dry out the smelly equipment. Win detergent promises to remove embedded odor from clothing.

The most cynical among us may wonder if this isn't all a plot to make us buy more shoes and shin guards, although it's hard to imagine how making stuff we come to detest can be a good business strategy.

Not all that surprisingly, the real experts - the makers of Adidas and Nike boots, the most popular cleats at Perlini - did not respond to a request for information.

So we're left with advice from moms, soccer-equipment salesmen, and coaches. Some of this involves making better use of readily available and free resources: air and sun. Many a mom has a rule that the shoes can't enter the house. Some say they can take the edge off the smell with common household items such as baking soda, dryer sheets, and (we admit there may be a fortuitous conflict of interest here) newspapers, the old-fashioned paper kind.

Diane Mueller, a Warminster mother of four soccer players, said she's solved the problem. She tosses everything, including the shoes, into the washing machine with soap and bleach after a game.



AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer

Two entrepreneurs with an answer to the agony of the feet are Annemarie McCartney (left) and Jill Levin. They're the inventors and marketers of Skunkies, sachets filled with a "proprietary" powder that desiccates and deodorizes soggy, smelly footwear.

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Her appealing idea was typically met with stunned silence, then disapproval, from high school coaches and people who sell shoes.

"Don't do that," said Christopher Hayes, the "resident boot expert" at Angelo's Soccer Corner in Huntingdon Valley.

He thinks the growing popularity of cleats made of synthetic materials has made the problem worse. They don't sop up water like leather, so they're lighter in the rain. They also don't breathe like leather.

But Dori Bryson, who works at Soccer Locker in Voorhees and coaches four girls' travel teams, prefers the synthetics, especially the ones with antimicrobial liners. She says they dry faster. After a while, she said, leather "starts to rot."

The best approach, everyone agrees, is to air out the shoes every time they're worn. Open them up as much as possible. When they're wet, stuff newspapers inside to soak up moisture.

Coaches say kids' shoes have always smelled, but they think equipment care has declined. You can't leave this stuff locked up in a bag and expect it to smell civilized.

"If you are throwing wet cleats in a bag, they are going to get so disgusting it's unbelievable," Bryson said.

Voorhees soccer moms Jill Levin and Annemarie McCartney had their moment of inspiration last October while en route to a soccer tournament with a car full of kids. They asked their passengers to get something out of their bags. "Six kids opened their knapsacks," Levin remembered, "and the smell was so vile, I had to pull over."

She's a fan of Donny Deutch, the former advertising executive who hosts *The Big Idea* on TV. His message, she said, is to "take your worst problem and try to remedy it and try to make a business out of it."

After the bag incident, Levin told McCartney, "This is the problem."

They tried products already available and were unimpressed. Their low-tech solution is a sachet filled with "proprietary" powder meant to draw out moisture and deodorize. They called it Skunkies. They're available in some soccer stores, Levin said, and the pair are in discussions with national retailers.

"We're sending some over to the troops for their boots. We have camouflage ones," she said. "I have them in all my kids' bags, wrestling, lacrosse. . . . I actually just started putting them in my refrigerator."

She'll have to compete with Procter & Gamble, which decided to make a special sports product after learning how many families were using extra-strength Febreze on shoes and sports equipment. The product wasn't really designed for that challenge. P&G came up with X-Sweat Technology, a formula that seeks out and neutralizes sweat "malodors," said Chad Brizendine, assistant brand manager for the new Febreze Sport. Dick's started selling it this year and it will spread to other retailers in February.

Brizendine said sweat is definitely the problem, but some materials make it worse. "Some fabrics tend to grab on and hold onto odors more than others," he said.

P&G looked for "torture test" items, such as shoes "that mothers will hang out the windows when they're driving kids home from practice," he said. Some soccer shoes made the grade, but they weren't the worst. The real nose torturers were the shoes of barefoot runners, who run cross country without socks, and triathletes, who put shoes on without socks immediately after swimming.

The new spray "works completely," Brizendine promised.

P&G has a deal with the NFL to supply team locker rooms with Febreze this season. "We kind of knew," he said, "that that was the torture test of them all, disgusting football players."

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