

# How To Remove Old Lettering from Jerseys Yourself

A guide by Bill Henderson

It might surprise you to learn that tackle twill lettering, going back to the 1950s, was originally promoted to teams as a way to control costs. It was purposely easily removeable so that uniforms could be stripped and re-used year after year. Even into the 1990s, many MLB teams sent their year-old jerseys to Spring Training or to the minor leagues where the player names were removed, the numbers were changed and sometimes the front crests were unsewn and changed as well.

At the shop, we are skilled at efficiently removing old lettering because we do it so often. In this tutorial, we will show you how to do it yourself, if you'd like to try. You can help save some money on the cost of your jersey project if you are up to the task.

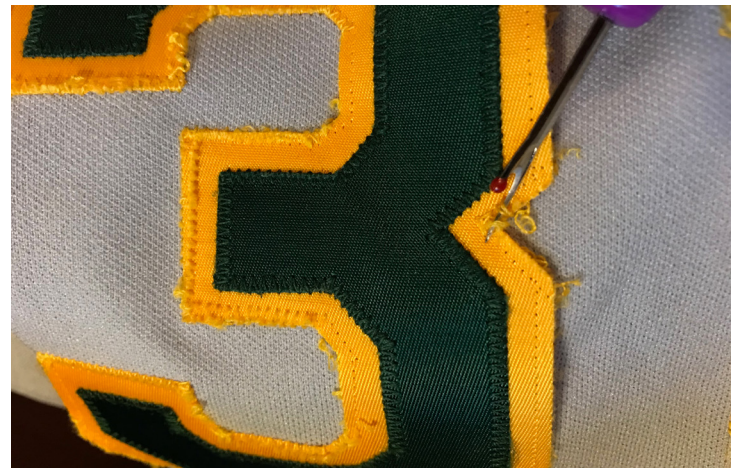
Note that while lettering generally comes off successfully from full-weight polyester jerseys, you must be extra careful attempting to remove it from the newer CoolBase or FlexBase ones., or fabric that is color-sublimated. This fabric can be damaged if the conditions are not perfect.

## The right tool: A seam ripper

Having a seam ripper is a MUST. Do not try to do this with anything else. No Xacto knives, scissors or blades. This small tool was designed to do the job right. You can find one of these at Joanne or any other fabric store, or you can order one online here or here. The longer ones are easier to use. A seam ripper will allow you to rip and pull out the thread that sews the lettering to the jersey without ripping the jersey fabric itself.

While most times lettering is sewn on with a single course of thread around its outer edge, sometimes multiple colors are sewn straight through the jersey, and all of the courses must be ripped before the lettering will come off. Here is an example of a Mets team issued BP jersey that has its lettering sewn on in three colors of thread!

Always rip the thread working from the front side of the garment, NEVER The back. Your ripper tool



*Above: the proper way to use the seam ripper. Always keep the point in view and rip only a few stitches at a time. Below: The most common mistake is allowing the seam ripper point to also go through the jersey fabric. Ripping these stitches will also make a nice unexpected hole in the garment.*



should be inserted under the zig-zag thread row only a few stitches at a time and then pushed forward to cut the few threads. Work around the edge until you have completed the outline.

Work slowly and carefully. Always keep the pointy end of the tool in view. The most common thing that people will do is to try to rip too many stitches at once and end up ripping holes in the fabric. It's actually very easy to do if you are not careful. If you bury the tool too deeply, and rip too aggressively you may find that you have made a long cut in the fabric. The sharp blade of the seam ripper doesn't care what it cuts, so make sure you are only cutting the thread and not the fabric.

Once you have ripped the thread around only one of the numbers or letters, turn the jersey inside out and with your fingernail scratch at the thread outline. It should start to come off easily. Pull the thread from the back. When you've pulled most of it out, turn the garment right side out again. You want to see how easily the lettering is going to come off so you can make a decision about whether or not you will continue this yourself, or send it to a pro. When pulling lettering off, if you find a few stitches are still holding it in place, carefully rip these one at a time, don't just pull lest you rip a hole in the fabric.

Besides thread, twill is held in place with tack adhesive. Sometimes the adhesive is weak and is willing to let go easily. Other times the glue is strong and does not want to surrender its bond. Using your fingernail, try to lift a pointed edge of the letter, then carefully pull it to see if it will easily come off. If it does, great! It may leave some glue marks behind or even some fabric color. These can usually be removed by me rather easily.

If the lettering won't come off, or comes off with difficulty, tearing or leaving behind massive glue and stains, it is best to stop and send me a photo. We can decide what to do. Rarely, but sometimes old lettering is so tightly adhered that its removal is ill advised unless we will be sewing the exact same thing over top. I will often advise you to rip the thread but let me try to get the lettering off.



*Showing the correct way; carefully ensuring that there is no jersey fabric pinched between the tool and the twill.*

If you have any qualms about this process, let me remove the lettering. It will cost you generally about \$35 for me to remove numbers and a name, and I am skilled at the task.

#### **What can go wrong:**

**Staining:** While glue residue usually can be successfully removed, the most common problem with lettering that has been removed is color transfer to the jersey fabric. In short, the jersey may be permanently stained by the lettering that



*Lifting the corner of this Reds logo, I can already tell from ample experience that it is going to leave a red stain that will be very, very difficult to remove. At right is the result if having removed a minor league logo that had been sewn on this former Indians MLB jersey. A lot of scrubbing and use of a bleach pen faded it enough to make it less objectionable.*

has been applied to it. This happens most frequently with red and yellow twill, and there is no guarantee that the staining will come off. I have several tried and true methods of cleaning these stains, and these are usually safe, but before I attempt this work you will need to agree that I am doing this at your own risk.

**Fading** is a problem with well-used dark colored jerseys. You may find that the fabric beneath the old numbers is two shades darker than the rest of the jersey that had been exposed to the sun. There's really no easy solution to this problem, but when new numbers are sewn in place it is far less obvious than you might think.

**Fabric Failure:** I've also had especially old or improperly stored jerseys start to disintegrate when I begin working on them. I can usually tell if this is a danger before I begin and will tell you so, but I have had relatively rare cases where a jersey had been so mildewed from improper storage that the mold had eaten the fibers that held things together.

The newest "tech" fabrics like Cool Base and Flex Base™ greatly dislike rough handling. If they are badly stained there may be no remedy except recovering the spots with the same lettering again. When this stuff starts to tear, it reminds me of wet toilet paper: it loses its structural integrity in a hurry.



*The player numbers leave distinct unfaded marks on this game worn mesg BP jersey. There is not much you can do about this except cover the spots with new numbers which will make this much less obvious.*

