

# Starter - Philosophy, Procedures & Protocols

Virginia Swimming, Inc.

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## Philosophy

- The **primary** responsibility of the starter is to ensure that **all** swimmers receive a **fair** start
- The starter does **not** “command” the swimmers to start, rather the starter **invites** the swimmers to swim
- **Always** speak in a calm voice; **never** raise your voice or yell
- Do **not** penalize the swimmers because **you** gave them a bad start
- Do **not** worry about the timeline after you have been given control of the swimmers as rushing the start will often lead to an unfair start
- Practice **patience, patience, patience** – do **not** rush the swimmers during the start

## Communications

- Arrive early for the start of each session and report to the Referee
  - Stroke & Turn briefings are generally held 45-60 min prior to the start of the session; arriving before this gives you an opportunity to meet with the Referee before the briefing begins
- Communicating early and often allows the Referee and Starter to function as a team
- What should be done before the session
  - Finish setting up timing system
  - Timing system test
  - Timers briefing
  - Other
- What should be done (or not) during the session
  - How to handle missing swimmers
  - How to handle false starts
  - Special instructions

## Timing System and Deck Check

- Well before the start of the session check the starting blocks for stability and have facility management fix any that are loose
- Check all equipment for proper connections (including start cable plugged into the “START” position and not the “BACKUP START” position)
- Position starting system strobe so that it can be seen by the timers
- Speakers located such that the starting commands can clearly be heard by the swimmers
- In conjunction with the Timing Equipment Operator, perform a complete electronic timing system check and do so early enough that problems can be corrected while still starting the session on time
- The timing equipment check should include:
  - Near and far-end (if any) pads
  - Near and far-end (if any) buttons
  - Near and far-end (if any) starting unit
  - A test start should be performed when switching connections from one end of the pool to the other to ensure that a starting signal is being received by the timing equipment

## Positioning

- The Starter shall stand within ten feet of the starting end of the pool
- Most Referees will let the Starter have the first choice of where to stand, with the Referee then having second choice

## Paperwork During the Session

- Keep track of the current heat/event on a heat sheet
- Mark any no-shows for each heat
- Mark any potential false starts (more detail to follow)
- Off Starter, when there is one, should record order of finish

- Have DQ slips available for writing false start violations

### **Focus Between Heats**

- Maintain a relaxed composure
- Especially if the Referee is “distracted” while handling DQs, watch the progress of the heat and alert the Referee when it is almost time for the whistle chirps (and keep an eye out for swimmers that are significantly behind the field so as to help prevent an early whistle)
- Starting no later than the 4-5 whistle chirps, scan behind the lanes for problems (missing swimmers, confusion, crowd blocking access to the blocks) and let the Referee know if there is a problem
- Know which lanes should have swimmers and let the Referee know which lane has a missing swimmer or which lane has a swimmer not listed on the heat sheet
- and where there’s a potential problem
- Many scoreboards will display a dot following the lane number when the timing system has been reset for the next race; consult with the referee for who will have responsibility for watching for this signal

### **Conditions Behind and Between the Blocks**

- This area sometimes becomes congested
  - Request Timers and Officials to step back when they block your view of the swimmers or otherwise distract you
  - Swimmers not on the blocks should remain behind the chairs
  - After the heat goes off, the next heat of swimmers can come forward
- Marshal should help enforce

### **Whistle Start Protocol – What Do the Whistles Mean?**

- 4-5 short whistle chirps by the Referee signals upcoming heat of swimmers that their start is coming up
- 1 long whistle blast by the Referee signals the swimmers to step on the blocks or into the water (as appropriate)
- For backstroke starts, an additional whistle blast signals the swimmers to return to the wall without undue delay

- The timing of the whistles is by judgment of the Referee, and is determined by the level of swimmers, the time line, and whether or not dive-over starts are being used

### **Pacing the Meet**

- It is the Referee’s responsibility to ensure that the meet is being paced correctly
- Pacing can be managed to some extent by the Referee blowing the whistle earlier or later to announce the next heat or to step the swimmers up (beyond that pacing is largely dependent upon how fast the swimmers are swimming)
- The Starter should not hurry the start to make up time or slow the start to slow things down, but rather should concentrate on giving each heat a fair start

### **Announcing Events**

- At meets with a separate Announcer, the Announcer will announce the events following the whistle chirps; if a separate Announcer is not available the events are announced by the Starter
- Referee: 4-5 whistle chips
- Announcer (Starter): “Event 1, Women’s 13-14 100 Yard Freestyle, Heat 1”
- Referee: 1 long whistle blast
- Swimmers step-up
- Starter: “Take your mark”
- Starter: Starting signal
- Swimmers swim
- Referee: 4-5 whistle chirps
- Announcer (Starter): “Heat 2”
- Continue as above

### **Announcing Guidelines**

- State complete event, not abbreviation
  - Butterfly, not fly
  - Backstroke, not back
  - Breaststroke, not breast
  - Freestyle, not free
  - Individual Medley, not IM
- Singular, not plural

- 100 Yard, not 100 Yards or 100
- 100 Meter, not 100 Meters or 100
- Unless directed to by the Referee, do **not** ask:
  - The swimmers to step-up
  - If there is a swimmer for lane X
  - If John Smith is present
- Do **not** use commands such as:
  - Stroke(s) to be used and/or the order of swimming them
  - Number of lengths
  - Any other language unless specifically requested to do so by the Referee
- Optional command that is used in VSI
  - Advise the heat when a swimmer will be attempting to achieve a time at an initial distance (ex. Going for a 50 Y time in a 200 Y event)
  - Announce after the swimmers are on the blocks
- Dealing with a noisy venue—Do’s
  - Wait for the noise level to drop, the crowd will generally become quiet if you wait
  - If no Announcer is available, announce “Quiet for the start, please”
  - If an Announcer is available, have a general announcement made requesting “quiet for the start, please”
  - Step the swimmers off the blocks if necessary
- Dealing with a noisy venue—Don’ts
  - Do not attempt to “talk over” the noise
  - Do not raise your voice or yell, it is generally ineffective and only makes you look bad
  - Do not proceed with “take your mark”, hoping that the swimmers will hear you

### **Forward Start**

- 4-5 short whistle chirps will signal the next heat of swimmers to be prepared to step up
- 1 long whistle blast signals the swimmers to step onto the blocks
  - Swimmers stepping up before the long whistle need not be stepped down,

- particularly if they will have to immediately step back up
- If the swimmer steps up “way early” you might indicate to the swimmer how early they are
- Different Referees have different preferences for handling this situation—do as requested
- When the swimmers and officials are ready, the Referee will signal with an outstretched arm that the swimmers are in the Starter’s control
  - Do not ask swimmers to step up, or call for missing swimmers unless directed to do so by the Referee
  - Act as a second set of eyes for the Referee; if there are problems behind the blocks, let the Referee know
  - Know which lanes should be empty/full
- When you judge that the swimmers are ready for the start, say “Take your mark”
- “Take your mark” should be said in a conversational tone, as in “close the door” or “shut the door”
- Prior to the “take your mark” command, the swimmer’s feet may be placed anywhere on the starting platform
- After the “take your mark” command, the swimmer shall immediately assume their starting position and have at least one foot at the front of the starting platform or deck
- In responding to the “take your mark” command it is important to remember that the swimmer may move a little or a lot, and there is no requirement to assume a crouching or tucked position, or to even move if they already have at least one foot at the front of the starting platform
  - Some swimmers may be in close to their final start position prior to the “take your mark” command and may only move an inch or two
  - Other swimmers may be standing upright and have to move a large distance to achieve their starting position
  - Still other swimmers may be standing upright and stay close to upright

- The rule states that the swimmer must “immediately assume their starting position”; the rule does not state that the swimmers must “come down together”
  - The variety of starting positions can challenge the Starter and only experience will help you get it right most of the time
  - When all of the swimmers are “stationary”, the Starter gives the starting signal
    - Stationary is not the same as motionless
    - Motionless means the swimmer can't be moving, while stationary means that they are staying in the same place
    - Just because someone has some motion does not necessarily mean that they are not remaining stationary (a flag flapping in the breeze is not motionless and yet it is stationary)
    - Making sure that a swimmer is stationary can be difficult as some swimmers continue to change position after a point at which you might have thought they would have stopped (experience will help here)
    - Want to learn to see the whole field simultaneously, without focusing unduly on individual swimmers
    - Stationary is a relative term when used with young swimmers; sometimes it is as good as its going to get
  - When a swimmer does not promptly respond to the command “take your mark”
    - 1st instance - Release the swimmers with the command “stand up” or “stand” which allows the swimmers to stand up or step off the blocks (the latter almost never happens but is allowed under the rules)
    - “Stand” should be said softly and slowly (sssstand) and not loudly and abruptly (STAND); the former tends to keep the swimmers on the blocks while the latter tends to scare them off
    - 2nd instance - stand the heat and issue generic warning such as “please respond promptly to my command”
    - 3rd instance - stand the heat, step it down, and issue specific warning to the problem lane such as “lane 3, please respond promptly to my command”
  - 4th instance - recommend to the Referee a DQ for “delay of meet” (extraordinarily rare)
  - The above procedures may vary depending upon the level of the meet and the preference of the Referee
  - Determining how long is too long when deciding when to stand a heat is a judgment call that is only learned through experience
    - As a general rule, if the swimmers are not losing their focus you can avoid saying stand; if they start looking at you and are readjusting their position it is probably time to stand the heat
  - Sometimes a swimmer will assume a starting position very slowly hoping to be the last one down and thus controlling the start
    - If the other swimmers are getting “edgy”, stand the heat
    - If the other swimmers remain ready to go, hold the heat a little longer and then start
    - If the swimmer is unduly delaying the start then warn as indicated earlier
  - Do not fall into a fixed timing pattern for your starting routine
  - Continue watching the swimmers for 10-15 yards to make sure that there are no problems
  - After starting the race, slowly lower the microphone while remaining ready for a recall if necessary
  - Alert the timing equipment operator of any empty lanes
- Backstroke Start**
- 4-5 short whistle chirps will signal the next heat of swimmers to be prepared to step up
  - 1 long whistle blast signals the swimmers to step into the pool
  - A second long whistle blast once all the swimmers have surfaced signals the swimmers to return to the wall without delay
  - The optional command “place your feet” is not ordinarily used in VSI sanctioned meets
  - The swimmers shall line up in the water facing the starting end, with both hands placed on the gutter or on the starting grips

- Standing in or on the gutter or curling the toes over the lip of the gutter is prohibited both before and after the start
- Proper foot position is the responsibility of the Starter prior to the start of the race and the responsibility of the Turn Judge after the start
  - If the race is started with the foot/feet already in an illegal position, it is a missed call by the Starter
  - If the foot/feet assume an illegal position after the start the call is made by the Turn Judge and not the Starter
- A warning should be issued to a swimmer with feet in an illegal position (Lane 4, please remove your toes from the gutter)
  - Multiple warnings may warrant a recommendation to the Referee for a “delay of meet”, but more often than not it is a confused young swimmer that just needs additional prompting
- Swimmers may be released from the starting position with the commands of “relax”, “stand”, or “stand up”
- All other aspects of the start are the same as the forward start

### **What is a False Start?**

- A false start occurs when a swimmer starts before the starting signal is given
- The key then to determining when a swimmer has committed a false start is in determining that the swimmer has actually started prior to the starting signal
- In many cases a false start is clear to everyone – the swimmer has become stationary in response to the “take your mark” command and then simply explodes off the blocks prior to the starting signal; this is especially clear if everyone else remains on the blocks
- Less clear examples of a false start occur when the starting action is not easily observed by everyone on deck, examples of which include:
  - The forward flinch of an elbow
  - The driving back of the leg

- The swimmer rocking back (note that going forward is not necessarily the first thing a swimmer will do when starting)
- All the above are quite possibly illegal if part of the starting motion
- When in doubt, the swimmer gets the benefit of the doubt
- A muscle twitch/ripple if not part of the starting motion is not be a false start
- One way to visualize a false start is to imagine the swimmer enclosed in a glass box following their becoming stationary
  - Incidental movement that keeps them in the box are not likely to be examples of a false start
  - Movement that results in all or part of them leaving the box are likely to be examples of a false start
- Consider a swimmer who loses their balance when stepping on the starting block and falls into the pool, or the swimmer who while assuming a starting position doesn’t quite find it and keeps moving into the pool
  - Ask yourself whether or not the swimmer actually started
  - If they slipped, if they fell, it isn’t a false start
  - This must be distinguished from a deliberate delay of meet in which the swimmer is playing around and winds up in the pool
  - Again, the swimmer gets the benefit of the doubt
- A swimmer follows another swimmer into the pool prior to the starting signal being given (they react to the motion of the first swimmer)
  - Each swimmer is responsible for his/her own start
  - If they immediately react to the first swimmer’s motion and start themselves, then it is a false start
  - If there is a substantial delay between the starts of the two swimmers or if the stand command has been given and the second swimmer dives in when they could have clearly stood up (they weren’t “scared” in by the command, they simply elected to dive in), then it may be more appropriate

to disqualify them for “deliberate delay or misconduct” (see below)

### **False Starts Under the No Recall Start Procedure**

- Any swimmer starting before the starting signal is given shall be disqualified if the Referee independently observes and confirms the Starter’s observation that a violation occurred
- Swimmers remaining on the starting blocks shall be relieved from their starting positions with the “stand up” command and may step off the blocks
- The Starter shall restart the race upon signal by the Referee
- If the starting signal has been given before the disqualification is declared, the race shall continue without recall (no recall start procedure)
- If the Referee independently observes and confirms the Starter’s observation that a violation occurred, the swimmer that false started shall be notified of the DQ upon completion of the race
- If the recall signal is activated inadvertently, no swimmer shall be charged with a false start and the Starter shall restart the race upon signal by the Referee
- The “stand” command can sometimes be used to save a swimmer from a false start:
  - If the Starter sees someone starting, says “stand”, and the swimmer can hold themselves up on the blocks, then no false start
  - If the “stand” command is given and the swimmer already starting continues into the water, no matter how valiant the attempt of the swimmer to do otherwise, it is still a false start
  - Conversely, a swimmer entering the water in reaction to a “stand” command can be relieved of a false start
  - The “stand” command does not give the swimmers a free pass to dive into the water
- A swimmer entering the water in reaction to another swimmer “false starting” should not be relieved of a false start

### **Dual Confirmation of a False Start**

- Upon observing a false start, both the Starter and Referee should independently record the observation on their heat sheet (ex. Circle the lane number of the offending swimmer)
- The Starter should then initiate contact with the Referee and report “I have a potential false start” and show the Referee his/her heat sheet
- With confirmation by the Referee, the swimmer is charged with a false start
- There should never be a discussion between the Starter and the Referee as to whether or not a false start occurred; this is no different than observing a relay take-off and should be a black/white call

### **Recalling a Heat**

- A bad start is not the same as a false start
- We do not recall for a false start; we can recall for a bad start
- Either the Starter or the Referee may initiate the recall of a heat
  - The Referee will initiate a recall by blowing the whistle; in the event that this occurs the Starter should immediately activate the recall signal on the starting unit
  - The Starter will initiate a recall by activating the recall signal and the Referee should reinforce this signal with the whistle
- Bad start examples
  - Not all the swimmers were allowed to become stationary prior to the starting signal
  - A flash went off on a camera right before the start
  - A loud noise occurred right before the start
- Recalled heats should be relatively infrequent occurrences
  - Frequent recalls may be a sign that the Starter is rushing the start and not allowing sufficient time for the swimmers to become stationary

### **Deliberate Delay or Misconduct**

- When a swimmer delays the start by entering the water or by willfully or deliberately disobeying a command to step on the blocks

or to take a starting position, or for any other misconduct taking place at the start, may be disqualified from the event by the Starter with the concurrence of the Referee

- The rule says “may” which is permissive but not an absolute requirement
- From a previous example, a swimmer slipping and falling into the pool at the start should not be disqualified under this rule, while a swimmer goofing around and deliberately entering the pool may be disqualified
- The Referee shall disqualify a swimmer who fails to appear at the starting platform ready to swim in time for the initial start of his/her heat
  - This can occur when the swimmer steps up after the Referee has closed the heat by extending his/her arm
- Prior to the advent of the “declared false start” rule, a swimmer could “refuse the blocks” which would result in a deliberate delay disqualification (this was done to maintain eligibility to compete when missing a race meant being barred from additional competition)

#### **Declared False Start**

- Swimmers reporting to the Referee prior to the start of their race and declaring their intent not to compete will be disqualified (except in finals when Championship scratch rules are in effect)

#### **Warning Signal**

- In individual events 500 yards or longer, a signal shall be sounded (most often a bell) over the water at the finish end of the lane of the leading swimmer when that swimmer has two lengths plus five yards/meters to swim
- Ring the bell from the time the swimmer swims under the flags until the swimmer returns to the flags
- If events have been combined (age, sex) into a single heat, the bell should be rung for the lead swimmer of each event in the combined heat
- The Starter should keep track of laps swum in all events in which a warning signal is required

#### **Starting Swimmers on the Deck or in the Pool**

- Starts from the deck or in the water are allowed for forward start events
- If starting from the deck, the swimmer must have at least one foot at the front edge of the deck following “take your mark” and then remain stationary until the start
- If starting in the water, the swimmer must have at least one hand in contact with the wall following “take your mark” and then remain stationary until the start

#### **Starting Disabled Swimmers**

- The athlete or the athlete’s coach should notify the Referee of any special needs
- Specific guidelines are set-out in the rule book with which the Starter should be familiar
- Deaf athletes are most often encountered
- Strobe needs to be positioned such that it can be seen by the swimmer at the start
- Hand signals are given in the rule book, but it is advisable to speak with the coach about the athlete’s particular needs

#### **Other Duties as Assigned**

- Brief Timers prior to start of session
- Stroke & Turn Judge for lanes adjacent to the starting unit (we prefer this not to happen)
- Relay Take-Off Judge
- Order of finish (off Starter)
- Trainer for Apprentices

#### **Miscellaneous**

- New Starters often feel they can do a session with no help or breaks
- Seasoned Starters welcome breaks as a means of remaining focused
- The starting unit should be switched off and connected to the charger between sessions