

## **STARTER CLINIC AGENDA**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Being a Starter is much more than three simple words. Like Stroke & Turn, it takes many meets and sessions to become confident and proficient.

LIKE all other officiating positions, Starter is mainly (and best) learned "on-the-job." We can convey some helpful information through clinics and reading, but it will all mean much more after you have worked a few sessions as a Starter Trainee and taken the Starter test.

UNLIKE other positions, Starter is the most "visible" position, and has the most direct impact on the success of the athletes. These facts should not scare you, but they should inform how you approach the job and art of starting.

*One of our goals as officials is to be as "invisible" as possible in the performance of our duties. After a long weekend, a question like "what did you do at the meet" is a sure sign of success! A Starter can be successful at this too, but it means sticking to a fairly tight script and set of responsibilities. It is much easier for a Starter to become "too" visible.*

My goal in training a Starter is always to get you "on the same page" as quickly as possible with standard expected protocols, before any other habits have a chance to take hold. This way you can expect to show up at any meet anywhere and be ready to fit right in as a Starter.

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## **STARTER PROTOCOL ... THE BASICS**

*(with thanks to Richard Hayes, 2011 clinic)*

- The Starter shall choose a position within approximately 5 meters of the start end of the pool.
- The Deck Referee shall take a position on either side of the Starter such that the Starter can see the Referee's hand extended when the swimmers are turned over to the Starter.
- Calm-cool-collected voice... "take-your-mark."  
Not... "take-your-mark?" Not... "Taaake.....yourmark."
- "Stand please" (or "Stand Down Please" for Backstroke) – should be rare.
- Consider stepping the swimmers down from the blocks on the second "Stand", but always on the third.
- Generally do not use the microphone to "single out" a problematic swimmer. If necessary, step the swimmers down and ask the Referee to speak with the swimmer individually.
- Start *just after* all swimmers are *visibly stationary* (not necessarily motionless).
- Follow the swimmers until all heads are up and a fair start is confirmed.
- The Starter can independently recall a *bad* start or the Deck Referee can instruct the Starter to recall a *bad* start.
- No Recall Rule - OK to recall Bad Starts, but not False Starts.
- False Start: No comments are made until the Starter has marked the lane(s) in question. Then the Starter initiates the process by saying "I have a possible". Deck Referee shall confirm by already marked lane number(s).
- The timeline is not a "Starter problem"...Use an abundance of PATIENCE to assure a FAIR START FOR ALL SWIMMERS.

### Suggested further reading

Virginia Swimming, Inc.

Search- "Starter- Philosophy, Procedures & Protocols"

Pacific Swimming

Search- "Deck Referee & Starter Guidelines"

USA Swimming

Search- "The Starter- Philosophy and Protocol"

# WHAT IS A FALSE START?

The rules state... “When all swimmers are stationary, the starter shall give the starting signal” (101.1.2.c) and “Any swimmer starting before the starting signal is given shall be disqualified if the Referee independently observes and confirms the Starter’s observation” (101.1.3A).

So what constitutes a false start? These scenarios should help you paint the picture.

## FALSE START SCENARIO #1

Swimmer leaves the set or stationary position prior to the starting signal. The starting signal is then given. The race proceeds and, assuming the Starter observed the early start and the Deck Referee independently observes and confirms the Starter’s observation, the offending swimmer is disqualified at the conclusion of the race. Rule 101.1.3B applies. This is a false start.

## FALSE START SCENARIO #2

Swimmer leaves the set or stationary position prior to the starting signal. The swimmer upon realizing the early starting motion attempts to catch himself/herself. Starter says absolutely nothing, and the swimmer fails to halt the forward motion and goes into the pool. Rule 101.1.3A applies. This is a false start.

## FALSE START SCENARIO #3

Exactly the same facts as #2 above, but this time the Starter says “stand please” after the swimmer leaves the set or stationary position. The seven other swimmers stand or step down from the blocks. The offending swimmer struggles, but once again is unable to halt the forward motion and falls into the pool. Unlike scenario #2 above, here the starter said “stand please”, but that does not change the false start result. The rule is clear that the “stand” command is for the benefit of the other swimmers on the starting blocks. When the stand command is issued, the athletes have the option of standing or stepping off the blocks. The offending swimmer did neither. He fell into the pool just like the swimmer in scenario #2. Rule 101.1.3A applies. This is a false start.

## FALSE START SCENARIO #4

Exactly the same facts as scenarios #2 and #3 above. However, this time when the command “stand please” is issued, the offending swimmer struggles, but is able to stand or step off the blocks. Rule 101.1.3A applies. This is NOT a false start. Why? Because the swimmer remained on the blocks or deck like everyone else in the heat, and no starting signal ever sounded.

## FALSE START SCENARIO #5

Exactly the same facts as scenarios #2 and #3 above. However, when the Starter gives the “stand please” command a swimmer(s) other than the offending swimmer instantly bolts from the blocks and enters the water. Rule 101.1.3D applies. The swimmer(s) clearly started in reaction to the “stand” command. This is NOT a false start.

## FALSE START SCENARIO #6

The swimmer, upon hearing the command “take your mark” starts down to take a set or stationary position. The swimmer loses his/her balance before coming set and falls into the pool. Rule 101.1.2C applies. The swimmer should be given the opportunity to come to his/her set or stationary position prior to the start. A loss of balance prevented that, and clearly this swimmer never engaged in any starting action. This is NOT a false start.

## **STARTER DUTIES**

**The Starter is ALWAYS on duty during a shift. Your responsibilities don't end with a successful start.**

- **Substitute Referee** – the Starter is the second set of eyes and ears for the Referee, and should **always be ready to supervise the competition (whether asked to or not)** when the Referee's back must be turned to take care of other business. Let the Referee know before you go off-deck for any reason.
- **Initiate possible false-start calls**, to be confirmed or not by the Referee.
- **Starting Area** – watch for and correct safety/interference issues around the starting area.
- **Distance Events** – count laps and/or ring bells during distance events.
- **Next Heat** – observe the swimmers in the upcoming heat for possible problems (equipment or wardrobe issues, confusion about correct heat/lane, possible no-shows, etc.)
- **Step in** as a Stroke & Turn Judge or Relay Take-off Judge when requested.
- **Anything else requested by the Referee.**

STAY IN COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR REFEREE on all of the above.

### **ADDITIONAL HEAD STARTER DUTIES (Zone 4)**

*(with thanks to Richard Hayes, 2011 clinic)*

**The Head Starter is the Team Lead** for the corner officials, both Starters and Deck Referees.

- **Pre-Meet** – coordinate duties and protocols with the Meet Referee as needed. Possibly recruit help.
- **Arrive 15-30 minutes before warm-ups** each session, or inform the Meet Ref if not possible.
- **Warm-ups** – supervise, or delegate supervision of, warm-ups and opening of special warm-up lanes.
- **Check equipment** – preferably during warm-ups (blocks, buttons, pads, strobe box, microphone)
- **Head Timer** – identify and prep as needed (extra watches for 25 yard events, etc.; encourage a vest)
- **Colorado Operator** – establish Protocol when Colorado problems arise (generally, "STOP")
- **Announcer** – instruct as needed on protocols (Event & Heat numbers, No shows, Finals, when to be quiet, etc.)
- **Starter/Deck Referee rotations** – assign to include "off-shift" duties (processing paperwork, finishes for 25 yard events, etc.) and brief on protocols (# no show calls, whistle timing, any other announcing, etc.) Also assign trainees to mentors.
- **Timers** – present or delegate the "Timer Briefing," including another test start
- **Paperwork** – availability of Clipboards, False Start slips, no-show slips, DQ slips, S&T Heat Sheets, etc.

**Hang out at the Official's Table...ready to step in at any moment.**

## PATIENCE, PATIENCE, and PATIENCE

You will often see the word PATIENCE repeated 3 times in various USA Swimming Starter training materials. This emphasizes two points:

1. You always need more patience than you think (at least when first learning the art), and
2. There are three times during the start when patience is especially important:

**A. Before "take your mark" (after Referee's extended hand).** Patience at this stage, allowing all swimmers to find their balance; adjust goggles, caps, suits; and finish ALL of their pre-race "rituals," will generally lead to a much cleaner start, with fewer occasions to stand up the heat for another try. **CAVEAT:** some swimmer rituals will only end when you say "take your mark" – only experience will tell you when that is going to be the case. Until then, give the swimmer the benefit of the doubt.

**TIP: The Referee's extended hand** never means "you must start the race ASAP." It only means "you have control, and may start the race when all of the swimmers are ready." Never feel pressured to start a heat.

**B. After "take your mark."** All swimmers should be allowed **ample time to become fully set** in their starting position. This includes **allowing backstrokers to "settle" after pulling up.**

**TIP: scanning the field** – during this process, don't try to focus on every individual swimmer. Instead, "zoom out" your field of view to see the whole heat, and only "zoom in" on an individual if something unusual catches your eye. Then "zoom out" again for any other issues. **This is all within 1-3 seconds.**

**TIP: the extra beat** – once you THINK all swimmers have become fully set (stationary), allow an extra "beat" (fraction of a second) more to be certain, **before committing** to the start signal. Any swimmers who are not finished setting, who slip and lose their balance, or who may be trying to anticipate your start, will often be discovered during this final beat. BUT ALSO, don't wait any longer than necessary before either (1) standing the heat and trying again (see below), or (2) starting the race. **It is a balancing act.**

**TIP: standing the heat** – if the above process takes so long that some of the earlier swimmers are starting to lose their focus or their set position, then fairness requires that you "stand up" the heat and try again. (NOTE: if you commit to the start button too soon, you have eliminated this option! Thus the need for patience.) If you have allowed the swimmers to fully prepare before "take your mark," this should be a rare occurrence, but don't hesitate to use it whenever achieving a fair start has become doubtful.

**TIP: short/fast races** – Use all of the same patience whether it is a 50 yard race or a 1650 yard race. Don't allow the extra "tension" of a 50 yard race to alter your starting process or frame of mind. All of the starting rules are still the same!

**TIP: small heats** – will tend to become set sooner (or at least you will notice it sooner), but should still be allowed same time as if it was a full heat. **Don't catch swimmers off-guard with a "faster" than ordinary start**, even if they all appear set. They may be set, but they are still not "ready" if you go too fast! They are accustomed to a little more time in "ordinary" heats.

**C. If you have to stand up a heat.** Allow ample time before saying "take your mark" again. This includes ample time for all the adjustments and rituals from the first attempt, **plus** some time for them to regain the focus they lost when the heat stood up. If the swimmers are bobbing up and down like marionettes, you are going too fast.

**REMEMBER: AT ALL STAGES OF THE START, YOUR TIMING MUST MATCH THE READINESS OF THE SWIMMERS. Never vice versa!**

## **STANDARD STARTER VOCABULARY**

Except in very unusual circumstances, the Starter should always strive to use **Consistent and Minimal** vocabulary. This is for the following reasons:

**Consistent Vocabulary** – we don't want to interrupt or distract any swimmer's concentration or "flow" with unusual or unexpected requests. Consistency promotes a smoothly flowing meet.

**Minimal Vocabulary** – if we give them more, they will learn to expect (and wait for) more, and this will also impede the flow of the meet.

### **USA SWIMMING STANDARD LANGUAGE**

**Take-Your-Mark.** – singular; you are speaking to each individual swimmer, not to the whole heat  
**ssstaaand please / stand down please [backstroke]** – always calmer and quieter than "take your mark"

**Step Up please** (ladies/gentlemen) – only after allowing ample time to respond to the whistles

**Step In please** (ladies/gentlemen) – only after allowing ample time to respond to the whistles

**Lane X, toes please** – to correct illegal backstroke starting position

**Step Down Please** (ladies/gentlemen)

### **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE (ONLY IF NEEDED)**

**Thank you ladies/gentlemen** (please clear the pool) – may also be needed during relays!

**Heat X** (ladies/gentlemen), **please come forward to your blocks** – only if not responding to whistles

**Lane X, Michael Phelps, Baltimore** – to call for a missing swimmer when requested

**Lane X, you are excused** – when a swimmer "sits on the block" before a race

**Step Up or Step Forward to the Edge please** – sometimes needed for young swimmers

**Lane X, toes cannot be above the edge of the gutter** – to correct illegal backstroke starting position

**Lane X, at least one foot must be at the front edge** – to correct illegal forward starting position, only after the first "take your mark" and "stand please" requests

**Ladies/Gentlemen, please respond promptly and hold your position** – when swimmer(s) are still slow to become set after the second "stand" of a heat

**Everyone not in this race, please move back behind the timers for the start** – only when needed.

**Ladies/gentlemen, be advised, Lane X is swimming for a 100 yard split.** – or whatever the distance

### **FOR FLY-OVER STARTS (ONLY IF NEEDED)**

**Stay in the water please** (ladies/gentlemen)

**Ladies/gentlemen in the water, please stay against the wall** for the start

**Ladies/gentlemen in the water, please stay against the corner of your lane** for the start

**If you find yourself wanting to say anything other than the above, you should generally check with your Referee first.**

**AGAIN: try to avoid unnecessary or excessive verbal requests. Give the swimmers a chance to respond to the "standard" requests first, which is what we want them to learn.**

## THE STARTER'S VOICE

**Voice (Tone and Cadence)** - can have different, positive or negative effects on swimmers. The ONLY effect you want, is for all of the swimmers to **gently, evenly, and calmly come down** and assume their starting positions. Your voice should mirror what you want the swimmers to do.

Therefore your voice should also **gently, evenly, and calmly come down**. — — — "take-your-mark."

**TIP: "take-your-mark." ends with a period, not with a question mark (?), and not with an ellipsis (...).**

**TIP:** if you are having difficulty finding this voice, try speaking as if you are letting out your breath in a relaxed "sigh." It can literally be one step above a whisper, as long as you are holding the microphone close enough to be heard clearly. If you find yourself holding your breath, you can't be relaxed or calm.

### **Other voices:**

— — — (an even and calm monotone) is also OK.

— — — (rising voice) is common, but undesirable. It sounds like a question, conveying uncertainty.

— — — ("sing-song" voice) is also common but undesirable. It can distract the swimmers.

— — — (uneven cadence) can add to already jittery nerves.

- - - (words too fast/sharp) can also add to jittery nerves.

**Keep in mind:** many swimmers have their ears plastered over with wet hair covered by 1 or 2 swim caps. **They can often hear your tone and cadence better than your actual words.** (How coaches and parents think their swimmers can hear them in the water is beyond me!)

**Volume:** if you feel like you have to raise your voice, or "push" your voice in any way when you address the swimmers, then you are holding the microphone too far away, and/or the volume is not turned up high enough. A "pushed" voice will be noticed by the swimmers, and can add to their tension level. **You should always speak as if there is an adult standing 2 feet in front of you in a quiet room.** EAT THE MICROPHONE – let it do all the work for you! (Feel free to bring and use disinfectant wipes!)

**No Age Differences:** some starters will unconsciously use "age-specific" tone and cadence when addressing younger swimmers. **Please avoid this!** Just like we apply the stroke & turn rules uniformly, you should address every age and level of swimmer in **exactly the same manner – as if they are mature adults.** The 6 and 8 year olds may or may not notice this, but the 10 and 12 year olds definitely will, and consciously or unconsciously will appreciate it. **Lead the swimmers** into the level of maturity we (eventually) want them to display during competition.

**AGAIN, speak to all swimmers the same way you want them to act: as mature ladies and gentlemen.**

**The above guidelines apply to everything you say as a Starter, not just to the "take-your-mark." request.**

## MISCELLANEOUS STARTING ISSUES

**Scoreboard Reset Dots** – learn what they look like, make it a habit to glance at them just as the long whistle is sounding. If they are not present, advise your Referee prior to starting the heat. This can save a timing correction nightmare for the previous and/or next heat.

**Meet Delays** – never leave swimmers in the water or on the blocks for prolonged delays. Step down the swimmers, and/or thank and excuse the swimmers in the water, as soon as you know of the delay. At an outdoor meet, **with the Referee's concurrence**, the next swimmers may be **allowed (never required)** to enter the water during a delay. They should be asked to remain within the backstroke flags.

**Possible False Start Before Starting Signal** – if you are able to stand the heat after a possible false start, immediately ask the heat to "**step down please.**" Then write down your observation(s) of possible false start(s) BEFORE speaking with the Referee.

**Swimmer goes in water before signal, not a false start** – if a swimmer loses their balance and goes into the water, stand up the heat, **BUT use your judgment** as to whether to step down the heat, or simply wait for the swimmer to get back on the block. **Stepping down swimmers, or leaving swimmers up on the blocks for too long, each comes with its own safety concerns.** Balance those concerns with the amount of time it appears to be taking to get ready for another start.

**No Response to the Stand Please request** – sometimes a swimmer will appear not to respond to your request to Stand Please. **No response is required by the swimmer;** they may choose to remain in their set position, or rise just slightly, to stay ready for the next try. **If you think your voice might have been too soft** for them to hear, you can try saying it one more time, but often after a couple seconds the swimmer will notice what the others have already done and stand if they wish to. **Otherwise, never insist that a swimmer stand up.** If what you really want them to do is step down, then that is the request you should use instead.

**If Unexpected Events Occur** – during the starting process, **get your finger away from the start button immediately!** If, for example, a sudden noise causes a few swimmers to go into the water, they will know that they have not heard a starting signal, and will generally stop immediately. If instead you hit the starting button and then try to recall the heat, it has just become much more difficult to stop all of the swimmers. Once they hear a starting signal, a swimmer does not want to risk ruining their race by slowing down or stopping.

**Always Follow Swimmers Until All Heads Are Up** – there are many reasons this is important:

- An echo or unclear starting signal might cause some swimmers to pull up short, indicating a recall might be appropriate.
- Something else unusual could happen that may cause you to recall or stop the heat
- Lane lines or backstroke flag sometimes break
- A swimmer could hit the bottom or have other difficulties
- The Deck Referee may ask you to stop the race

**Always make sure at least one set of eyes is on the swimmers in the water at all times** – for the same reasons as above. If the Deck Referee becomes distracted, the Starter should always be aware and keep facing the pool.