Philosophy of Starting

By Mike Gavin

The role of the Starter is unique. It is the only officiating position that has the potential to directly influence the outcome of a race. Therefore, it is very important for the Starter to carry out the duties and responsibilities in a manner that is neutral and has no impact on the competitors.

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance for new officials as well as refresher training for experienced officials.

Starter's Goal: A Fair Start for All Swimmers

The most effective Starters have a unique mindset, including keen senses (vision and hearing) and plenty of patience. Prior to the start of each session, the Starter must become familiar with and test the starting equipment. Always test the microphone, they are all different! Work with the other officials and adjust the equipment volume and/or your speaking volume to be sure you can be clearly heard from all lanes!

To accomplish the Starter's Goal, there are three main aspects to understand and consider, including knowing when the field is ready to assume the starting position, when the field is ready to receive the starting signal, and when it is necessary to intervene to ensure a fair start.

1. **Considerations for knowing when the field is ready to assume the starting position**

    - The STARTER reads the field, to determine when THE FIELD is ready to start—Not the other way around!
    - Control your emotions in your voice commands so that the swimmers can control theirs
    - Avoid visible routines
    - Observe swimmers behind the blocks while awaiting Referee's commands
    - Short whistles, long whistle, Be in position and ready to go at long whistle
    - Patience as the swimmers settle into position
    - Eyes and ears open, be alert and aware of external movement and noise
    - Observe foot positions: Forward Start—One foot at front of block, Backstroke Start—Toes not curled over gutter, if using ledges some part of the foot has to be in contact with the wall or pad
    - Once all swimmers are in position, no excessive movement, no noise, ready for the starting command

2. **Considerations for knowing when the field is ready to receive the starting signal**

    "**Take Your Marks"**

    Do not underestimate the importance of pace, tone, precision, and enunciation when perfecting the starting command! Remember, you are the only official that has the

potential to directly influence the outcome of a race. Each Starter's normal speaking style likely needs to be adjusted to project a clear and precise starting command.

Considerations for a Proper Starting Command

- Moderate your tone and speaking pace
- Use a conversational tone, do not shout
- Slow the pace of speaking
- Invite the swimmers to swim
- Use a slightly descending tone
- Make a statement, not ask a question
- Delivered in a relaxed, but confident way
- Be alert across the field!
- "Close the door"
- "Pass the Salt"
- "**Take Your Marks"**

Starting Signal

- Wait for the swimmers to become stationary
- Stationary does NOT necessarily mean motionless
- Stationary = Establishes vertical plane at front of block
- Send the swimmers once all are stationary

3. **Considerations for knowing when it is necessary to intervene to ensure a fair start**

If Things Don't Go as Planned … For ANY Reason!

- "Stand, please"
- To be delivered more softly and extremely calmly
- PATIENCE, allow all swimmers to refocus before giving the starting command again
- "Relax, please" or "Swimmers, relax". Step down for prolonged delay
- Coordinate with Referee as appropriate for restarting the heat

The False Start

- A Swimmer STARTING early—breaking his/her stationary position before the start
- Record observed violation in writing, take time to ensure proper lane number
- Follow meet procedures, dual confirmation, etc.
- After the swimmers are in the water, assume your other responsibilities as assigned, e.g., stroke and turn judge, lane judge, etc.

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Other Things to Say (And Not Say!)

- Refer to the swimmers as “ladies” and “gentlemen”
- NEVER deviate from the language of “Take your marks,” and “Stand, please”
- “Lane __, toes, please,” if necessary to lower or adjust toes in backstroke
- “Thank you, ladies (gentlemen),” to clear pool
- Additional instructions only as directed by referee
- Never use the microphone to reprimand

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Starting is very challenging and requires much practice to develop confidence and effectiveness. The more experience you gain, the more comfortable you will become! During each meet, stay calm, maintain your composure and do not become complacent. Remember, each start is unique, with a different heat of swimmers, movements, and potential external noises. The swimmers in every heat deserve your full attention and focus to provide a fair start for their races!

About the Author

Mike Gavin has been a CSOA Official since its inception and has worked as a Starter or Referee at NCAA Conference meets from Division I, II, and III. Mike is also a USA Swimming certified Starter and NFHS official. Mike has worked as a Starter at USA Age Group Championship Meets and at High School District Championships. Mike swam collegiately at Clarion University and is still active in masters swimming and triathlons.