

# **Starter Manual**

## **Potomac Valley Swimming**



# The Role and Responsibilities of the Starter

## Introduction

The starter is one of the most important officials on the deck. The starter is in direct contact with the swimmers during a critical phase of the race – the start. The starter sets the tone and tempo of the meet. The starter's actions can directly affect the swimmer's performance. Therefore, this position cannot be taken casually. It is essential that starters work regularly and constantly aim for perfection.

The starter and referee must work together as a team. The referee may request the starter to assist in various ways prior to the meet. The starter is typically asked to make sure that warm-ups are being properly marshaled (aka invigilating) while the referee meets with the stroke and turn judges. The starter usually conducts the timers' briefing and also serves as place judge by recording the order of finish for each heat.

Starters must be guided by one dominant principle: *Be fair to all competitors and always give the benefit of the doubt to the swimmer.* This does not mean giving a competitor "a second chance." That rationale leads to sloppy officiating.

The most important characteristic of a good starter is patience. Every starter should ensure that their demeanor is patient, calm, and confident. A patient starter will get the best starts from their swimmers.

The starter must be able to determine when all swimmers in a heat are set. For every start, the starter must ensure that the start is fair for all competitors. If the starter believes one or more swimmers left early (a potential false start), the heat should not be recalled. The starter must note the lane(s) of the offending swimmers(s) in writing on the heat sheet and report the infraction to the referee. A False Start is only charged when the referee confirms the call.

A swimmer should not be disqualified if a false start may have been caused by some external provocation such as a sudden noise, a photoflash by a spectator or even poor starting technique. On the rare occasion when the decision is made to recall a heat, no swimmer shall be charged with a false start.

## Remember:

- Take officiating seriously, work hard at it
- Work regularly at meets
- Be professional in manner
- Be in the proper uniform

## Equipment:

Starting Device – usually an Electronic Timing System (ETS) starting device (with a horn starting signal and a strobe light). The starting device should be located so that the strobe light is clearly visible to the timers. The speakers should be located so the starting command and signal can be easily heard by the swimmers.

Recall Device – the recall signal (a warbling sound) produced by the starting system. It is activated by releasing and then depressing the starting button while holding down the microphone button within 15 seconds of the start.

Connections – check the connections to the harness, the starting device and the ETS console. Test the unit during or prior to warmups, including ensuring that the starter's voice can be heard behind each lane.

At the end of each session, check with the meet director or meet referee to ensure that the starting device will be connected to the charger so that the device has a full charge for the next session.

It is important that you become familiar with how the starting device is set up. You may have

to swap out a device during the session. The set-up is very simple; however it is easy to make the wrong connections and that will affect the times recorded and the way the device operates. The connection from the starting device to the harness always goes into the START receptacle in the starting device and the START receptacle on the harness. The speaker receptacles are clearly marked on the starting device. Do not use the BACKUP START receptacle on the harness – this can cause issues with timing.

### **The Starter Shall**

- Stand within approximately 5 meters of the starting end of the pool and have a clear view of the starting swimmers.
- Position the starting device where the strobe flash is clearly visible to the timers.
- Upon a signal from the referee (an outstretched arm following the long whistle), assume full control of the swimmers until a fair start has been achieved.
- If no announcer is used, notify swimmers of the event and heat to be swum only.
- Use the minimal commands necessary so that the swimmers always experience standardized starting commands.
- If necessary, use supplementary commands, such as “Place your feet” for backstroke starts; or to advise the heat when a swimmer is attempting to achieve an initial distance time.
- Adhere to starting modifications the referee may elect to use for swimmers with disabilities.

### **Prior to the Start of the Session**

The starter should

- Test all of the equipment.
- Have a discussion with the deck referee(s).

The discussion with the deck referee(s) should include

- The procedure for indicating a false

start.

- Positioning on deck. The starter should indicate where they would like to stand for forward and backstroke starts and where they would like the deck referee to be positioned.
- Potential issues behind the blocks or empty lanes.
- Any other pertinent information or unusual circumstances.

### **The Forward Start**

Assume your deck position to start the upcoming heat prior to the finish of the current heat. Show that you are relaxed and confident in your starting ability with your body language.

The starting procedures begin with the referee signaling the next heat to get ready behind the blocks, by a short series of whistle chirps. For sessions when there is no announcer, the starter announces the heat number (can be event number or description and heat number). For example, “Event 5, Girls 11–12 50 yard freestyle, heat 1.” In a Finals session, the announcer will likely announce the new event and heat, and possibly the individual swimmers.

The referee’s long whistle signals the swimmers to step up on the blocks. If the swimmers fail to respond to the referee’s whistle, the starter may be asked to direct the swimmers to step onto the starting block or platform with a simple command “Swimmers, step up please.” Remember that swimmers may start from the blocks, from the deck, or in the water.

When the swimmers and officials are ready, the referee will turn over jurisdiction to the starter with an outstretched arm. Make sure the referee is positioned so that you can see the outstretched arm. If the referee drops their arm back to their side, relax or stand the swimmers.

Do not resume until the referee turns control back to you.

Be patient when allowing all swimmers to assume the position on the blocks they want to use for the start. The rulebook says the swimmer must have “one foot at the front of the starting platform or deck.” Note that it does not say “edge”; there is no requirement for toes to be at or over the edge of the block. Watch to see their feet are in the final chosen position. The swimmers will then show you when they’re set and ready to hear the “take your marks” instruction.

Deliver the “take your marks” instruction in a calm, conversational tone that’s loud enough for the swimmers to hear over any possible crowd noise, but not so loud the instruction sounds like a shouted command. Use a cadence that is inviting with a slight falling in pitch.

Be patient and remember that the swimmers start the heat, not the starter. When that “sweet spot” moment is achieved and all swimmers are stationary, push the starting button. If it takes too long for all swimmers to assume a stationary (or “set”) position, use the “Stand please” command. While we want to allow each swimmer sufficient time to assume that position, we can’t disadvantage the other swimmers who immediately found that position and are ready to start. Remember that you must be patient with the swimmers and not use the “Stand” command too often. If you must stand them up a second time, make a generic announcement about assuming the starting position without delay, then pause and say “take your marks.” If it is necessary to stand the heat a third time, the referee should address the issue with the offending swimmer(s).

When a swimmer does not respond promptly to the command, “take your marks,” or starts before the starting signal is given, the starter

shall immediately release all swimmers with the command, “Stand please” (or, for backstroke, “Stand down”), upon which the swimmers may stand up (down) or step off the blocks. A swimmer who would otherwise be charged with a false start may be relieved of the charge if the false start was caused by the swimmer’s reaction to the command “Stand.”

### **The Backstroke Start**

The swimmers should enter the water on the referee’s first long whistle. If they have not done so, the starter may be asked to say “Step in please.” On the Referee’s second whistle, the swimmers should return to the wall without delay and line up in the water, facing the starting end, with both hands placed on the gutter or on the backstroke starting grips. If backstroke ledges are being used (this is increasingly common in PVS), it is the responsibility of the starter to ensure that no swimmer is having difficulty with their ledge and that all swimmers using ledges have some part of each foot in contact with the touchpad or end wall (see rule 101.4.1). Stroke and turn judges will assist the starter in checking the correct positioning of the toes, typically by looking down to quickly perform the inspection, correcting placement if necessary by talking to the swimmer, and then looking up as a signal to the starter that the swimmers are in a legal position for the start.

On the referee’s signal (an outstretched arm), check to see that the swimmers are ready. At the command “take your marks,” and until the feet leave the wall at the starting signal, the swimmer’s feet, including the toes, must be in the proper position. The swimmer is permitted to have the toes above the surface of the water but the swimmer is not permitted to stand in or on the gutter or to curl the toes over the lip of the gutter even if the top of the gutter is below the surface of the water. If there is a need to make a correction, say e.g., “Lane 5 toes.” Use concise terminology whenever possible. If a

swimmer assumes an illegal position after the starting signal is given, it is a stroke violation, not a starting violation, and therefore it is the responsibility of a stroke and turn judge.

Be patient! Give the swimmers adequate time after “take your marks” to settle down. If too much time goes by, then stand them down (“Stand, please” or “Stand Down, please”), let them relax, say “Place your feet,” and let the swimmers comfortably get in position, then say “take your marks.” (In some cases the referee may blow another long whistle to initiate the starting sequence.) When that “sweet spot” moment is achieved and all swimmers are stationary, push the starting button.

### **Recall**

In rare cases, it may be necessary to recall a heat. For example, if a loud noise occurs immediately prior to the start signal being given and one or more swimmers leave their set position early, it is appropriate to recall the heat. Remember that a routine false start is not a reason to issue a recall.

### **Deliberate Delay or Misconduct**

The starter shall report a swimmer to the referee for delaying the start, for willfully disobeying a command, or for any other misconduct taking place at the start, but only the referee may disqualify a swimmer for such delay, willful disobedience or misconduct. This is an extremely rare call.

### **False Starts**

Any swimmer initiating a start before the signal may be disqualified if the referee independently observes and confirms the starter’s observation that a violation occurred. In order to “start,” a swimmer must have assumed a set position on the block or deck.

The starter may charge a swimmer with a false start only if the deck referee has observed the violation and confirms that the violation

occurred. If the false start occurs before the starting signal is given, the starter should step down the remaining swimmers while the referee informs the swimmer that he/she has been disqualified.

If the starting signal has been given before the disqualification is declared, the heat shall continue without recall, and any involved swimmers disqualified at the conclusion of the race. This includes swimmers who may have been “drawn off” by the offending swimmer. It is important to remember that each swimmer is responsible for their own start.

If the recall signal is activated inadvertently, no swimmer shall be charged with a false start. A swimmer who would otherwise be charged with a false start may be relieved of the charge if the false start was caused by the swimmer’s reaction to the “Stand up” command.

### **When the Starter Observes a False Start**

After the heat has started and the microphone is replaced, calmly mark the starter heat sheet to indicate which heat and lane the false start was observed. Double-check that mark for accuracy of heat and lane. Show the marked heat sheet to the deck referee and implement the procedure discussed prior to the start of the meet. This may include pointing out the heat and lane on the heat sheet, as well as verbally indicating a false start was observed. The deck referee should also show the starter his/her marked heat sheet as confirmation of a false start. Under no circumstance should a false start confirmation be based solely on a discussion. If necessary, note any peculiarities to the false start on the heat sheet for later reference.

### **After the Heat is In the Water**

Watch the swimmers until all heads have surfaced, then replace the microphone to a position where it can’t be bumped and the cord isn’t in a traffic zone that could cause tripping. Step out of the starting area to allow room for

deck referee, chief judge and stroke judge. Using the starter's heat sheet, confirm the next heat's swimmers are reporting to the assigned lanes. Note on the heat sheet any empty lanes, false starts or other matters for which there should be a record. Then begin preparations to start the next heat.

### **Warning Signal**

In all individual events 500 yards and longer, the starter (or a designee) shall sound a warning signal (usually a bell) over the water at the finish end of the lane of the leading swimmer. When using a bell to signal the "bell lap" in a distance event, ring it from the time the swimmer comes under the backstroke flags, turns at the wall and returns to the flags. Use counting sheets and coordinate identification of the lead swimmer and correct lap with the electronic timing system operator if desired.

### **Order of Finish**

The starter also serves as the place judge, taking the order of finish and recording it on the heat sheet for each heat. If there are two or more starters in rotation, the "off" starter is responsible for taking the order of finish. If there is only a single starter for the session, they record the order of finish and then proceed to the next heat without unduly slowing the meet.

### **Starting Swimmers with Disabilities**

Starters must become familiar with the procedures for starting athletes who have disabilities. USA Swimming Article 105 addresses officiating swimmers with disabilities.

For hearing impaired swimmers, Potomac Valley conforms to the guidelines presented under Article 105. The standard progression of arm gestures is not as easy as it looks. It takes practice, and the starter should spend some time practicing the sequence before the session begins. Pay attention to the final gesture,

ensuring that the arm is dropped at the same instant that the starting signal is given, to the best of your ability. If a swimmer or coach requests a modification to this procedure, every effort should be made to accommodate the request. The starter's heat sheet should be marked to identify the hearing impaired swimmer's events, heats, and lanes, including any relays. It is also recommended that the starter perform the sequence of arm signals for several heats (or the entire event) before the hearing impaired athlete swims, in order to gain additional review and comfort with the procedure. This also affords the swimmer an opportunity to clearly see the procedure before they swim. It's helpful to make eye contact with the swimmer when they are behind the blocks, a heat or two before the athlete swims, and nod that you are aware that the swimmer is there. Additionally, the starter must be certain that the strobe is positioned so the swimmer can see it easily. The referee may make further accommodations to assist the swimmer. It is imperative that the starter avoid doing anything that would draw attention to any athlete with a disability.

### **Hints and Suggestions**

#### ***Equipment and Facilities:***

- Meet management should have a backup starting system set-up on deck. Locate it and make sure it works.
- Some means of voice amplification should be provided. The ETS comes with at least one external speaker and can accommodate more. Usually, because of crowd noise, it is advisable to use, at least two external speakers—one attached to the main system and the other at the opposite side of the pool.
- Have disqualification slips handy (for false starts) if needed. If there is a chief judge during the session, they will typically write the DQ slip.
- Bring your bell and counting sheets for sessions with one or more distance events.

### ***Things to Think About Before the Meet Starts:***

- Does the referee need your assistance before the meet? Do you need to assist with marshaling while the referee is briefing the officials or dealing with other matters?
- If an electronic timing system is being used, verify that the equipment, including the pads and buttons, is operating properly. This is best done during the warm-up.
- What is the likely traffic flow on the deck? Take steps to make sure swimmers and others cannot walk in front of you and the referee during a start.
- What additional instructions, if any, should you give?
- Check the starting blocks. If they are not in proper working order, notify the pool facility manager. This is a safety issue, and if they cannot be fixed, they should not be used.
- Verify whether dive-over starts will be used.
- Check your voice level in the microphone before the session begins.
- Where will the referee stand during the starts? Will it be different for backstroke starts? Will the referee assist you in making sure the feet are in a legal position prior to backstroke starts? How will the referee signal you if there are problems?
- Are relays being swum in this session? If so, does the referee expect you to participate in judging them?
- Does the referee expect you to handle any extra duties (e.g., act as a stroke and turn judge)?

### ***Starting:***

- Keep track of the event and heat number. Mark each heat off on your heat sheet as it is swum. Note the empty lanes.
- A calm, conversational tone and voice inflection is critical. Speak clearly, distinctly and slowly. Do not shout or

“bark” commands. That only tends to cause false starts.

- Remember that the starter has authority in conjunction with the referee to relieve a swimmer of the responsibility for a false start if the action might have been caused by a reaction to the starter’s instruction to “Stand.” This authority, however, should be used with discretion to preclude abuse of the main intent of the false start rule.
- Do not attempt to compete with excessive spectator noise during the start. Wait for reasonable quiet.
- Avoid using a fixed timing pattern to your starting routine. Remember that the swimmers start the heat, not the starter.
- Continue to watch the swimmers for 10–15 meters after each start. Observe to make sure there is no doubt it was a fair start.
- When an Electronic Timing System is being used, inform the operator about empty lanes.
- Be sure the preceding race is complete before doing anything that would cause swimmers in the next heat to either enter the water or step up on the starting blocks.
- When using a bell to signal the “bell lap” in a distance event, ring it from the time the swimmer comes under the backstroke flags, turns at the wall and returns to the flags.

### ***Common Starting Issues:***

- Swimmer not paying attention to the starter, taking position late or not at all. Solution: stand the field and start again.
- Swimmer who does not change position in response to “take your marks.” The rules do not specify what the starting position should be, other than stating that the swimmer must have “one foot at the front of the starting platform or deck.” Note that the swimmer is not required to crouch down. The swimmer is only required to be stationary immediately prior to the start.
- Starter getting the laps mixed up in distance events. If the event requires a warning

signal, count the laps yourself. Do not depend on the timer or the counter at the other end of the pool. USA Swimming does not require that each swimmer have a lap counter at the turn end of the pool. Also, lap counters may visually signal laps to their swimmer in either ascending or descending order, and they may signal from the sides rather than the ends of the pool. PVS has forms for keeping track of the

number of lengths swum. Use them. It is best to track each swimmer to make sure you spot a lead change versus lapping. Check your count with the ETS operator. Stay focused; don't allow anyone or anything to distract you, or you will lose count and run the risk of signaling the bell lap at the wrong time or over the wrong lane.



# What is a False Start?

(The following is taken from the "[What is a False Start?](#)" document from USA Swimming.)

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 marks" 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.**

### **FALSE START SCENARIO #7**

What about the scenario where the starter gives the "take your marks" command and all the swimmers come down and take a set position. Prior to the starting signal, a swimmer initiates a starting movement which the starter sees but instead of standing the heat up, the starter waits just a moment allowing that swimmer to reset prior to the starting signal. Surely this is not what we would like to see in this situation (prefer the starter to stand the heat up). However, is this still a false start?

### **RESPONSE:**

In the scenario you pose no false start occurs. As long as all of the swimmers, including the one who initiated a starting movement, are in a stationary position immediately prior to the starting signal, the start is legal. Often it is preferable for the starter to wait patiently for a swimmer to reset after an aborted starting attempt rather than immediately issuing a "stand" command. If the pause to reset is only momentary, the slight delay may be less disruptive than standing the swimmers and starting over again.

# Timers at PVS Meets: Minimum Requirements & Guidelines

All Potomac Valley starters must be familiar with the timing rules of USA Swimming, as well as the following guidelines set by the PVS Officials Committee for timers at PVS meets. If there are insufficient timers for the type of timing system used at the meet, the starter should inform the meet referee as well as the Meet Director (who is the person ultimately responsible for ensuring that the timing system complies with USA Swimming rules). It is the responsibility of the Meet Director – not the starter – to find the required timers.

The timing rules are found in Section 102.23 in the USA Swimming rulebook. As defined in the rulebook, there are three possible primary timing systems: Automatic (touchpads), Semi-Automatic (electronic button finish), and Manual (stopwatches); the rules for timers are distinct for each type of timing system. These rules are summarized below.

## Automatic Timing

Touchpads are the primary timing system. This is the type of timing used at most PVS meets. Timers are used to operate the required backup timing systems (semi-automatic and manual).

**Requirements:** When Automatic Timing is used as the primary system, a minimum of one timer is required to operate both the secondary (button) and tertiary (stopwatch) backup systems.

**Recommendation:** Having to operate a backup button, a watch, and handle the clipboard is too much to ask of a timer, particularly when doing dive-over starts with a short heat interval. So, the recommendation is two timers per lane; one timer operates a stopwatch and button, the other timer operates a button and handles the clipboard.

## Semi-Automatic Timing

This type of timing uses an electronic timing system without touchpads. The primary timing system is buttons, with stopwatch backup.

**Requirements:** When Semi-Automatic Timing is used as the primary system, a minimum of two buttons is required. Each must be operated by a separate timer. A backup consisting of at least one stopwatch is required.

**Recommendation:** The recommendation is two timers per lane; one timer operates a stopwatch and button, the other timer operates a button and handles the clipboard.

## Manual Timing

This type of timing uses stopwatches only.

**Requirements:** When using Manual Timing, three timers per lane are required, each operating a stopwatch. Only hand-held, battery-powered, digital read-out type watches designed for timing purposes may be used.

## Watch Times

Watch times should be recorded to the hundredth of a second (0.01 s). If a watch shows times to the millisecond (0.001 s), the last digit should be dropped (do not round the watch time).