



SUBURBAN SWIM LEAGUE 2025

STARTER HANDBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this handbook is to provide Suburban Swim League Team Starters with a set of protocols, guidelines, interpretations, and reference materials related to Starting. This effort is the compilation of many years of experience by League Starters combined with training and resource material from USA Swim, as well as various College and High School Swimming literature sources.

The handbook covers the basics of starting equipment, meet preparation, pre-meet responsibilities and meetings, starting procedures, directives or commands, false start interpretations and procedures, fly over starts, the Recall Starter role for the League Championships, starting philosophy, safety guidelines, and several technical points for Starters to consider.

The Appendix contain various other resources that Starters may find useful.

OVERVIEW

This guide is intended to ensure a safe, fair, consistent, and standardized approach to starting races for the dual meet season. This allows the swimmers to become acclimated to the starting process, know what to expect at each pool, and to be prepared for the League Championship at the end of the season. The primary aim of the Starter is to ensure a **SAFE and FAIR** start for all swimmers. The Starter and Deck Referee work together closely to achieve this goal. It is the Starter's responsibility to give every swimmer their best chance of success in each race; this is accomplished with patience, reading the field accurately, correcting any problems that might interfere, and halting any race that was started unfairly. Any questions or uncertainty about the application of the rules to achieve this are discussed with the Deck Referee, and the Deck Referee's ruling is final.



EQUIPMENT

The standard starting system is the Colorado Championship or Infinity start system. Each system is equipped with an integral strobe light, although some pools use a remote strobe light also. All Starters should be familiar with the various start system microphones and their push button operation, as well as how to make volume adjustments on the unit before a meet. Each of the systems has a rechargeable battery that takes between 4 and 6 hours to charge completely. When fully charged they can be used without house power to run an entire meet. The Championship start system can also be plugged into house power via a cord equipped with a small transformer which allows it to run safely next to a pool on low voltage (12 volt) rather than full house power (110 volts).

It is suggested that team Head Starters coordinate ahead of a meet to see that visiting teams bring their start head and microphone with them as a backup in case something malfunctions with the home pool system.

Light travels significantly faster than sound making the strobe light essential for timing races manually. It is used to start the backup stopwatches rather than the audible start signal for more accurate timing, as well as for any swimmers who have hearing impairment. It should be placed such that the field and timers are able to view it without interference from swimmers, officials, flags, fans, coaches, or any other obstruction.

Team Head Starters should assemble a tool kit to have on deck during a meet as it is not unusual for wires to break or become loose. Tool kit content recommendations include: small and large Standard and Phillips screwdrivers, wire cutter/strippers, pliers, wire brushes to clean corrosion from connectors, 0.177 caliber brass or steel bristle (nylon will not work) bore brush with rod and handle for removing corrosion from the inside of deck plate connectors, dielectric grease, a small crescent wrench, a small voltmeter to check wire continuity, various wire connectors, electrical tape, various sized zip ties, extra banana clip connectors, and the like.



MEET DAY PREPARATION

Well in advance of the beginning of the meet, or the night before, ensure that the start system battery has been charged fully even if the start system is going to be connected to house power. (In the event of a power outage, the Colorado and start system can still be used to conduct the meet and collect times if both are charged.)

During setup, ensure that all starting equipment is properly connected and perform a function check of the microphone, start button, strobe, start system speaker, and any remote speakers. Ensure that the Starter's directions and signals can be heard clearly in all lanes. The start system should be secured with a bungee, rope or Velcro strip to a deck pole or tent to guard against being accidentally knocked into the water. Working with the Colorado Operator, perform a function check to ensure that the start system triggers the timing clock correctly when the start button is pressed.

The Starter should check each block prior to the start of the meet to determine if any are loose or if there is anything wrong with them that might affect safety or fairness during the meet. Any problems must be corrected prior to the start of the meet. If a problem with a block cannot be resolved to the Starter's satisfaction, it cannot be used during the meet.

The Starter should inspect and test the recall rope if present and brief the Deck Referee, any coaches, or other personnel assigned on how to drop the recall rope if directed.

The team Head Starter should check with each coaching staff to determine if there are any swimmers with special needs prior to the first event and relay any relevant information to the other Starters and Deck Referees. If time allows, the Starter's meet sheet should be marked to indicate any affected heats.

The team Head Starter or designee should attend the Official's meetings prior to the start of the meet and communicate any specific points or needs to the other meet officials and brief the rest of the team Starters if they learn of anything they should be made aware of.

The visiting team Head Starter or designee should meet with the home team Head Starter and coordinate any assistance if needed. Teams are encouraged to provide starting opportunities to visiting Starters to improve consistency throughout the League and strengthen the Starting community.



STARTING THE RACE

The Starter should select a position within 10 feet of the starting end of the pool. The Starter's location must offer a vantage point from which all the swimmers on the blocks as well as the water under them can be clearly seen. This vantage point must also allow the Starter to differentiate the swimmers accurately so that any violations can be assigned to the correct lane. The Starter selects their preferred position (which may vary depending on event) and the Deck Referee adjusts to it, typically on the opposite side of the Starter from the blocks. Not all pool layouts allow for this, so officials should agree on positioning prior to the beginning of the meet.

For backstroke starts, the Starter may need to adjust their position by moving closer to the blocks to verify that all the swimmer's toes are beneath the surface of the water after their feet are set

The starting process begins by the Starter calling swimmers for the next heat behind the blocks when the last swimmer in the previous heat is about halfway across the pool from the finish. This gives the Clerks, the Starter, and the Deck Referee time to assess if there are any swimmers missing or if there are any other issues that need to be addressed before calling the next heat onto the blocks. As the last swimmer in the previous heat is between the backstroke flags (5-meter mark) and the finish wall, the Starter calls the next heat onto the blocks.

The Deck Referee verifies that the pool and timing system are ready for the next race, then signals the field with one long whistle, extending a hand toward the Starter. At that point, the Starter assumes control of the meet until a fair start has been achieved. It should be noted that while safety and fair starts are of primary concern, Starters are encouraged to help keep the meet moving along smoothly and efficiently by working in coordination with the Deck Referee, Operations, and the Clerks of the Course.

Once the Deck Referee transfers control of the meet to the Starter, the Starter's focus should narrow down to the field. Achieving a Safe and Fair start requires reading the field accurately to know when it is ready to receive directions, detecting and correcting any problems that might interfere with a Safe and Fair start, and providing clear, calm, timely directions to the field leading up to the sound of the start signal. Once the race has started, the Starter must continue to observe the swimmers to make sure a fair start was achieved and be ready to intervene and recall a race if necessary. Only after it has been determined that a race has been started fairly should the Starter's attention be turned to the next heat.



The following directives shall be used for all races by all Starters to establish uniformity, provide a consistent message, and eliminate Starter idiosyncrasies:

First heat of an event -

- **Call swimmers behind the blocks:**
"Event 2, heat 1, behind the blocks."
- **Call swimmers onto the blocks:**
"Event 2, heat 1, step up."
- **Wait for whistle and hand signal from the Deck Referee:**
- **Identify the distance and stroke:**
"Event 2. Boys 9-10, 100-yard IM."
- **Wait for the field to be ready:**
"Take your mark."
- **When the field has taken their marks and all the swimmers have become set, depress the start button:**

Note: After the start signal is given the Starter should continue to depress the talk key until all the swimmers have surfaced and the Starter can be certain the race was started fairly. Only then should the talk key be released. This is necessary so that if a swimmer pulls up short for some reason, or if the Starter identifies something that made the start of the race unfair, the recall signal can be given quickly by pressing and holding the start button again to trigger the recall signal, reducing the number of strokes taken by the swimmers before they can be stopped. The recall signal should be held until all swimmers have stopped.

Subsequent heats -

- **Call swimmers behind the blocks:**
"Heat 2, behind the blocks."
- **Call swimmers onto the blocks:**
"Heat 2, step up."
- **Wait for whistle and hand signal from the Deck Referee:**
- **Identify the distance and stroke:**
"100-yard IM."



- **Wait for the field to be ready:**
"Take your mark."
- **When the field has taken their marks and all the swimmers have become set, depress the start button:**

Note: Announcing the event number, sex, and age group for the first heat of an event serves as a signal to the swimmers, coaches, and Clerks of the Course as to which group of swimmers should be getting ready behind the blocks. After the initial heat of an event, it is not necessary to announce the event number, sex, or age group for subsequent heats unless the Starter sees a specific need to do so.

Directives for Backstroke and Medley Relays (in-water starts) -

- **Call swimmers behind the blocks:**
"Event 5, Heat 1, behind the blocks."
- **Clear the previous heat from the pool (9 – 10 age group):**
"Thank you, ladies/gentlemen. Please exit the pool."
- **Wait for the swimmers to clear the pool:**
- **Call the swimmers into the water:**
"Event 6, Heat 1, step into the water and set your feet."
- **Wait for whistle and hand signal from the Deck Referee:**
- **Identify the distance and stroke:**
"Event 6. Boys 9-10, 50-yard backstroke."
- **Wait for the field to be ready:**
"Take your mark."
- **When the field has taken their marks and all the swimmers have become set, depress the start button:**



FALSE STARTS

What exactly is a false start?

Simply put, a false start occurs when a swimmer leaves their mark to start the race before the start signal is given. What that means technically is that once the "Take your mark" command is given, swimmers take their preferred starting position (their 'mark'). Once they have taken their mark and become 'set', they must wait for the start signal before moving toward the pool. When the swimmer becomes set, they establish a vertical plane at the front of the block. After the "Take your mark" command is given and becoming set, a swimmer who moves toward the pool to start the race before the start signal is given, breaking that vertical plane at the front of the block, has committed a false start.

The prototypical false start takes the form of a swimmer trying to anticipate the start signal by leaving their mark and diving into the pool before the start signal is given.

Another common form of false start occurs when a swimmer begins to lean, or roll, forward toward the pool after the "Take your mark" command has been given in anticipation of the start signal. This forward motion in anticipation of the start signal breaks the plane at the front of the block the swimmer established when taking their mark and provides the swimmer with an unfair advantage over the rest of the field as they are moving toward the finish line before everyone else. If this motion continues, the swimmer will roll far enough forward that they will leave the block and end up in the pool. This is a false start.

If the Starter detects this motion, they can release the field with the "Stand, please" command and reset it. If the rolling swimmer can regain their balance and stand, there is no false start assessed as the field had been released. In some cases, the rolling swimmer has leaned toward the pool too far, cannot regain their balance, and falls forward off the block into the pool. This is a false start as the swimmer's forward motion in anticipation of the starting signal breaking the plane was the act of starting prior to the start signal being given.

The "Stand, please" command is the Starter's most powerful tool to correct problems after the "Take you mark" directive is given as it releases the field from their marks and puts the meet effectively on hold until the Starter begins to give new directions. It should be noted that, on occasion, a swimmer may react to the command "Stand, please" as if it were the starting signal and should not be penalized. Any swimmer entering the water FOLLOWING a "Stand, please" command will not be charged with a false start unless the swimmer was attempting to gain an unfair advantage by starting early as described above.

Occasionally as a swimmer takes their mark, or while they are waiting for the rest of the field to become set, they may lose their balance and begin to fall forward. This is **NOT** a



false start if the swimmer is falling and not trying to start the race. This situation is most common in younger age groups as well as with inexperienced or nervous swimmers. Patience and accurately reading the field to make sure they are ready to receive the "Take your mark" command will eliminate most of these instances as the entire field will come down together if they are ready.

Movement after the "Take your mark" command that does not break the plane at the front of the block is **NOT** a false start. The rules do not indicate that the swimmers must be perfectly still prior to the start signal, and it is not uncommon to see foot adjustment, slight body wiggle, twitching, or even backward motion prior to the start. Though not technically an infraction, this movement does have the potential to create an unfair start for swimmers that can perceive (and be distracted by) the movement. If the Starter detects this type of movement, they should release the field by standing them. After releasing the field, the Starter can direct, "On my command, we will all come down together and hold for the start." When the field is ready again the Starter can begin new directions.

It is not unusual to see swimmers surprised into leaving early as the result of another swimmer in a nearby lane false starting. While all swimmers leaving their marks in the act of starting before the starting signal shall be charged with a false start, an exception should be made when that swimmer has false started because of the action or movement of another competitor who has startled or drawn them into the water. Any swimmers involved in deliberate delay or misconduct shall receive a false start.

Though rare, loud unexpected noises, yells from the crowd, the Deck Referee's whistle, or anything else outside of the directions from the Starter can potentially startle a swimmer into starting prematurely. This is especially true for younger and/or inexperienced swimmers. If the Starter or Deck Referee believes that a premature start was due to circumstances like this, no false start will be assessed as the start was unfair for the field.

After a false start has occurred, if a swimmer falls in, or if a race is recalled because it was not a fair start, the Starter must notify the field whether or not a false start has been assessed. This should be an announcement that specifies which lane has been assessed an infraction or whether there is no penalty against any of the lanes. This announcement must be made so that the field and coaches know who did, and did not, false start. Examples include: "Lane 4, one false start." and "There is no false start."

If a swimmer is allowed to swim after being disqualified in a heat due to false starting, the Starter must notify the field of an exhibition swimmer in that lane.



False start protocol:

The League requires dual confirmation for assessing false starts. The Starter and Deck Referee each observe the start of a race and determine if a false start has occurred. If so, each should independently make a notation in their meet sheets of the lane they saw false start and compare their sheets to determine if both officials saw the same infraction in the same lane. The benefit of the doubt ALWAYS goes to the swimmer. False starts should not be assessed if making the determination requires convincing. If the Starter and Deck Referee's notations do not agree, or if there is any uncertainty, there can be no false start assessed.

False Start process for 12-and-under events -

12-and-under swimmers are allowed one "free" false start and are only disqualified from the race if they false start twice in a heat. As a result, a 12-and-under swimmer who false starts the first time will hold an advantage over the rest of the field having started before everyone. This necessitates recalling the heat so that a fair start can be achieved for the whole field.

If the Starter perceives that a false start has occurred, the recall signal should be given as quickly as possible by pressing and holding the start button until all the swimmers have stopped. This may take some time if the swimmer's heads are underwater, and the recall rope should be used if necessary. After following the false start protocol, the Starter should confer with the Deck Referee to determine if the heat can be run again immediately, or if the race should be moved back a few heats to give the swimmers a chance to catch their breath. When the recalled heat is brought onto the blocks again, the Starter must notify the field which lanes were assessed a false start, or if no false start is being assessed to any lane.

False Start process for 13-and-up events -

13-and-up swimmers are NOT allowed one "free" false start like the 12-and-under swimmers and are disqualified from the race the first time they false start in a heat. This creates a situation in which it may not be necessary to recall a heat if a swimmer false starts, since the swimmer is disqualified from that race and does not hold an advantage over the rest of the field even though they started before everyone else.

If the lane that false started **DID NOT** cause an uneven, unfair start for the rest of the field, the heat should be allowed to continue. This is often seen when a swimmer tries to gain an advantage by predicting the start and leaves their mark *just* prior to the start signal being given. The length of time between the swimmer leaving their mark and the start signal may be very small, but still perceptible to the Starter and Deck Referee. If a false start is assessed after following the false start protocol the swimmer is disqualified from the heat. The Deck Referee is responsible for filling out a disqualification sheet and getting it to the Operations team.



If, however, the Starter perceives that the false start **DID** create an unfair start for the rest of the field, the heat must be recalled. This is a split-second judgement call by the Starter, and the decision should be made with certainty and confidence. If a false start is assessed after following the false start protocol the swimmer is disqualified from the heat. The Deck Referee is again responsible for filling out a disqualification sheet and getting it to the Operations team.

If the race is recalled the Starter should confer with the Deck Referee to determine if the heat can be run again immediately, or if the race should be moved back a few heats to give the swimmers a chance to catch their breath. When the recalled heat is brought onto the blocks again, the Starter must notify the field which lanes were charged with a false start, or if no false start is being charged to any lane. If the Starter and Deck Referee agree to allow the disqualified swimmer to swim the heat as an exhibition swimmer, the Starter must notify the field of an exhibition swimmer in that lane.

Delay of Meet False Starts.

A false start may be assessed for Delay of Meet for continued, willful, slow response to the "Take your mark" command. If a swimmer does not respond to the "Take your mark" command and remains standing after the rest of the field has become set, the Starter should give the "Stand, please" command and release the field from the set position. The Starter should direct the field, "On my command, we will all come down together and hold for the start." When the field is ready again, the Starter can start new directions. If the swimmer is again tardy in coming to position, the Starter may assess a false start for Delay of Meet to that swimmer. Starters should be mindful of swimmers with special needs prior to assessing Delay of Meet false starts.

For 12-and-under swimmers a second assessed false start in a heat will necessarily result in a disqualification for that swimmer with the concurrence of the Deck Referee. For 13-and-up swimmers, the first false start assessed will result in a disqualification. If the Starter and Deck Referee agree to allow the disqualified swimmer to swim the heat as an exhibition swimmer, the Starter must notify the field of an exhibition swimmer in that lane.

In the backstroke or medley relay, a Delay of Meet false start may be charged to any swimmer who fails to maintain their feet and/or hands in a legal position after they are warned by the Starter that their position needs to be adjusted to become legal. Any swimmer who dives headfirst into the water or takes strokes away from the pool edge when asked to step in the water and set their feet may also be assessed a false start for Delay of Meet with concurrence from the Deck Referee.

Swimmers may be given a Delay of Meet false start by the Deck Referee or the Starter if they arrive late to their blocks for a race, delaying the meet. Swimmers who fail to appear at the starting block when called and miss the start are automatically disqualified



from the race. When calling a heat behind the blocks and when the “Step up” command is given, the Starter should survey the field and the meet sheet to determine if a swimmer is missing from a lane. If a swimmer is missing, the Starter should call, “Lane X?” and give the swimmer, Clerks, and/or coaches a brief period to get/find the swimmer and get them on the block, especially with the younger age groups. This brief period should be short enough that the other swimmers are not left standing on the blocks for too long.

Any swimmer who delays the start of the race by entering the water or by willfully disobeying the Starter’s command to take a position on the blocks may be disqualified from the event by the Starter with concurrence from the Deck Referee. Additionally, any swimmer who intentionally false starts or otherwise willfully delays the meet may be disqualified from a race.



FLY OVER STARTS:

As teams have grown, the increased number of swimmers has caused dual meets to become longer. At some facilities, teams operate with an agreement to be finished by a certain time so that the public or club member hours of pool use are not compromised. To increase efficiency, the league employs fly over starts at all meets. Starters and Deck Referees should agree on fly over procedures before the meet begins.

Fly over starts keep the swimmers that have just completed an event in the pool until the next heat has left the block. Swimmers from the last event remain stationary under the block, or off to the side of the lane, so as not to interrupt the start of the next heat. At the start of the next heat, the previous heat of swimmers immediately exits the pool.

Fly over starts will be employed at all 50 and 100-yard forward start events unless there is a need to adjust (special needs swimmers).

Swimmers in the water must not hang on the blocks or disturb/distract the swimmers in the next heat in any way. Starters should remain vigilant for this and correct it if it occurs prior to giving the "Take your mark" command.

CAUTION: Fly over starts increase meet efficiency, however Starters must wait for the Colorado system to reset prior to starting the next heat. Failure to do so could result in unrecorded times. Typically, the Deck Referee assumes the responsibility to make certain the system is ready for the next heat prior to the long whistle. On some systems, this is denoted on the score board by a dot in the lower left corner or the heat or event number is advanced. If uncertain, check with Operations prior to the start of the meet to determine how to be certain the Colorado system is reset and ready for the next race.



RECALL STARTER

A Recall Starter for all races will be assigned at the Championship Meet to assist the Starter in the 10 or 12 lane pool. The Recall Starter is to observe the start just as if they were the Starter and call any false starts they observe. The Recall Starter should depress the microphone talk key on the recall start head when the Starter begins directions to the field and hold the microphone against the thigh or chest until the race has been started fairly. If the Recall Starter observes a false start, the start button must be pressed, released, and pressed and held again to sound the recall signal. If the Starter or Recall Starter signals a recall, the other Starter should also key up a recall signal and hold it until the entire field stops.

It is easier to see the lanes more distant from the Starter's position on the deck, and so the Recall Starter will often focus on the lanes nearest the Starter for the start of each race, while the Starter focuses on the entire of the field. The Recall Starter may signal false starts in any lane and must make a notation in their meet sheet. The Recall Starter should immediately notify the Starter and Deck Referee which swimmer(s) committed the false start they called so that the infraction can be compared with any infractions the Starter or Deck Referee observed. The benefit of the doubt will **ALWAYS** go to the swimmer. At least two observations, with one by the Deck Referee must agree. If both notations do not agree, there can be no false start charged.



STARTER MINDSET

Starting can be thought of as a kind of practice, like law or medicine, or as an art. As with those examples, innate ability will only take you so far; progressing requires some effort, experience, and a desire to become better. The Starter has the distinction of being the only official who has a direct, immediate effect on every swimmer, in every race. Timers, the Deck Referee, and Stroke and Turn Judges only observe and react to what the swimmers are doing after the race has started. Recognizing that the Starter works both with, and for, the swimmers is the first step to being a good Starter. Good Starters have fewer false starts, conduct faster meets, and provide swimmers with their best opportunity to achieve their fastest times.

The mindset of the Starter is focused on three primary goals: Safety, Fairness, and Efficiency.

- **Safety** – Though often overlooked, safety is the first and most important goal of the Starter. The primary thing on the Starter's mind is protecting the swimmers from injury as they conduct the meet. This starts before the meet begins during setup when the Starter inspects the blocks and continues throughout the meet as flyovers and in water starts are conducted. Every decision must pass through the lens of Safety, and experienced Starters do this almost unconsciously. Starters must also take care to avoid the complacency that comes with repetition, long event assignments, and mental fatigue. A section with several Safety related topics is included with this document, and all Starters are encouraged to review them regularly.
- **Fairness** – After Safety, the Starter's main goal is to provide every swimmer with a fair start. The most important aspect of providing a fair start is the Starter's ability to read and understand the field. It is the field that determines when the "Take your mark" command is given, not the Starter. This requires patience and focus from the Starter, as well as solid control of any internal emotion. After the "Take your mark" command, the Starter must allow enough time for all the field to become set and ready to receive the starting signal. Rushing the field to take their mark or start the race has a direct effect on the fairness of the start and will result in more false starts and slower times for the swimmers. Understanding the rules and how to apply them, having a firm grasp of the False Start concepts and protocols, knowing how to correct problems that arise, and a calmness of demeanor will also affect fairness. A section with several technical tips and pointers is included with this document.
- **Efficiency** – The Starter is one of the most important components in running an efficient meet. Maintaining a consistent pace and rhythm while conducting the meet provides a predictable and less stressful environment for the swimmers, coaches and other officials. Eliminating or reducing false starts with patience and by reading the field accurately is one of the largest contributions to conducting a meet



efficiently. Sticking to the directives and avoiding extra words when communicating with the field reduces the time required between races and shaves off a surprising length of time over the course of a meet. Each of these factors are small on their own but are additive throughout a long meet, especially during the three-day Championship meet at the end of the season. The Starter must also recognize and avoid getting caught up in the stress and urgency of others on the deck who might be concerned with meet length or schedule lag. When time becomes the focus, safety and fairness are the first to be sacrificed. The Starter is the agent of the swimmers, not the clock, and must always protect the Safety and Fairness of each race for every competitor.

- In closing, the mindset of the Starter is ultimately one of service. Service to the swimmer's Safety in every decision. Service to Fairness for every swimmer by applying the rules correctly and providing an opportunity to have their best start and fastest time in every race. Service to the clock by conducting the meet as efficiently as Safety and Fairness allow. In every Starter's heads up display should be three words that will guide every action during a meet: Safe, Fair, Efficient.



Safety

Safety is everyone's responsibility on deck and requires vigilance and commitment to ensure. Complacency MUST be fought. For the Starter, swimmer safety while conducting the meet is of primary importance and must be kept in mind at all times. The following considerations are certainly not a complete list but serve to provide a set of concepts that have proven effective over many meets, for many Starters. Starters are encouraged to identify and share any other recommendations with their fellow officials.

- When calling swimmers onto the blocks, the Starter should observe the field carefully to make sure there are no swimmers who are off balance or struggling with the height of the blocks before further commands are given, especially with younger swimmers or swimmers with special needs. Extra patience is required with these swimmers.
- At some pools the block platforms are small and relatively high off the deck. These can create anxiety in younger swimmers if they are held on the blocks for too long while an Operations problem is fixed, or a missing swimmer is located. If a delay might last for a significant period of time, the Starter should step the field down off the blocks while the problem is resolved.
- Flying insects, especially bees or wasps, can create panic in younger swimmers. If the Starter observes a swimmer reacting to an insect, the field should be released with the "Stand, please." command and/or possibly stepped down off the blocks until the problem is resolved.
- When the swimmers are instructed to take their mark, they must respond by assuming a position with at least one foot on the front edge of the block (for forward starts). This is a requirement of the rules, and it is especially important to make sure younger swimmers get their forward toe to the front edge of the block (or preferably with a few toes curled over the front edge) to minimize the chance of a foot slipping and causing a fall during the dive. If a swimmer's toes are not at the front of the block, the Starter should provide direction, "Lane X, toes to the edge please."
- Fly over starts during 50(+)-yard events can create significant hazards in the pool. The Starter and the Deck Referee must continually evaluate the field and determine if fly over starts can be performed safely, especially in the 9 - 10 age group. It should be recognized that the swimmers in the water may be excited, dazed, or distracted after their swim and might not stay close enough to the wall for the next start. Inexperienced and younger swimmers can have short dives and end up coming nearly straight down off the blocks at the start endangering themselves and swimmers under them in the water. The Starter should observe the swimmers in the water to be sure they are close to the wall for the start and



correct their position if necessary by directing, "Swimmers in the water, please hug the wall". If in doubt, clear the pool before calling the next heat onto the blocks.

- Backstroke events also present significant hazards when calling the swimmers into the water after the previous heat to avoid having a swimmer jump in on top of another who just finished a race. It is recommended to clear the 9 – 10 age group before calling the next heat into the water to set their feet. While older age groups may be familiar with the process and not necessarily need to be cleared prior to having the next heat enter the water, it should be recognized that not all swimmers come to the League with the same level of experience and care must still be taken to protect them. If in doubt, clear the pool before calling the next heat into the water.
- Different pools in the League have lanes with different depths and diving can lead to significant head, neck, and back injury or paralysis in shallow areas. As a result, swimmers must always enter the water feet first for backstroke events. Cannon balls are acceptable.
- While a race is in progress, spectators and teammates should not be allowed to sit or stand on the blocks to cheer.
- Younger swimmers may need help to get out of the water in some pools. If directing timers or others to help them, the Starter should make sure that both arms are being used to lift them out of the water rather than just one by providing direction, "Timers, please help the swimmers out of the water with both arms."
- The Starter and Deck Referee should be observant of the swimmers in a race and take immediate action if a swimmer is showing signs of distress or is not surfacing after a turn.
- Some swimmers may not be able to get out of the water onto the deck, even with help. The Starter should be watching for this and direct these swimmers to the closest ladder or stairs, holding the meet until the swimmer is able to clear the pool.
- If the Starter notices any swimmers showing signs of physical distress after a race behind the blocks they should check on them or direct someone else to do so.
- On occasion, younger swimmers can have accidents while on the block. Urine should be rinsed off the block and deck with a five-gallon bucket of pool water once or twice before continuing. Anything more significant will need to be disinfected before the meet can continue.



- The Starter should remain aware of what is going on behind the blocks in general, and either correct or notify the Deck Referee of any activities that could jeopardize safety. This includes individuals (parents or swimmers) taking photos or videos behind the blocks.



TECHNICAL POINTS FOR STARTERS:

- The Starter's demeanor, voice, cadence, and body language all have a direct, significant impact on every swimmer individually, and on the entire meet in general. The Starter's conduct and pacing sets the tone of the entire event. Every Starter should seek to project calm impartial professionalism, consistency, and patience on the deck while officiating. There will be fewer false starts, better times, and a more efficient meet as a result.
- Directions to the swimmers should be consistent from heat to heat, event to event, and from pool to pool. The minimum number of words required should be used, as extra words spoken for each heat can add up to a significant amount of time added to the overall duration of a meet (see Appendix for examples). Though the start system will function as a public address, it shouldn't be used as one unless necessary. If the Starter is performing correctly, the swimmers and spectators will barely be aware of them as the meet progresses.
- The Starter **MUST** read the field accurately to achieve a fair start. This requires significant patience and attentiveness. It is the field that determines the correct time for the Starter to deliver the "Take your mark" command, not the other way around. While waiting for the field to become ready on the blocks, the Starter should be scanning for correct foot position at the front of the block, that goggles are on, and for anything that needs to be corrected prior to moving forward. The field will indicate it is ready when goggle and cap adjustment ceases, and the swimmers become focused and motionless.
- Some swimmers may not be familiar with the timing and process of a proper start. In most cases, this manifests itself in a slow response to the command, "Take your mark". Patience on the part of the Starter is needed for these swimmers. The Starter can often 'talk the swimmers down' with their voice by slowing or drawing out the "Take your mark" command slightly for swimmers who are slow to respond. If there is a significant delay on the part of a swimmer to come to their set position, release the field and direct that, "On my command, we will all come down together and hold for the start."
- **ALL SWIMMERS MUST BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE THEIR MARK PRIOR TO GIVING THE START SIGNAL.** Swimmers require a brief, variable period of time to become set after the "Take Your Mark" command. This will include time to mentally process the command, crouch down, find their grip, take a breath, and possibly adjust their rear foot. All of this happens quickly, but the Starter **MUST** provide enough time for the field to do all of this and become set. As with the "Take your mark" command above, it is the field that determines the correct time for the Starter to give the starting signal.



- Once the field has become set, the hold before the start signal is given should be brief without rushing the field. There is a fine line between too short and too long of a hold, and Starters should always be working to read the field as accurately as possible. The hold is not intended to unsettle the swimmers, but rather to give them time to prepare for the start. This point is critical because if the Starter doesn't allow enough time for the athletes to become set, they cannot have their best possible swim because they weren't ready (which is not Fair), and more false starts will result (which is not Efficient) as swimmers try to rush taking their marks or starting in subsequent events.
- With good starting, exemplified at College and Olympic events, the time between the final "k" sound in "Take your mark" and the start signal hovers between 1.5 and 2.5 seconds, with the average being near 2.0 seconds. This can feel like forever to the Starter if they are inexperienced or nervous. Correct timing can be felt and practiced by watching experienced starters at meets or on YouTube and counting along silently, "One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, etc." until the start signal is given. While the start signal is always given when the field is ready rather than by a count, having a feel for the correct amount of time is helpful.
- In the process of taking their marks and coming to a set position, it should be recognized that some younger swimmers or swimmers with special needs may not move to a fully crouched position, may elect to start from the deck, or even from the water rather than the block. Some may not be able to come to a stationary position at all. These set positions are acceptable if the swimmers do not violate the false start rule.
- Swimmers are not allowed to come to a set position and then change to another set position after the "Take your mark" command is given. This is often seen in the backstroke events when, at the last moment, a swimmer can't decide between holding the edge of the pool or the handles on the block. If the Starter perceives this activity the field should be released with the "Stand, please" command and reset.
- For the backstroke and medley relay, the swimmers should enter the water on the command, "Step into the water and set your feet." On the command, "Take your mark," the swimmers shall pull up and hold their position until the signal. The rules require that both feet and all toes are completely below the water line. Swimmers cannot stand, lean on the sill, or curl toes over the sill. It is the responsibility of the Starter to verify a legal position for all swimmers after their feet are set and to correct any violations prior to the start.
- A swimmer shall not be disqualified for an illegal starting position or movement if the race is permitted to proceed without recall. Enforcement of the correct starting position before the start signal is given is the responsibility of the Starter.



- It should be recognized that this is a recreational, yet competitive league; some swimmers may try to gain an unfair advantage by delaying their set position after "Take your mark" has been given. Rather than wait for these swimmers, and thereby upset the rest of the field, release the field and reset them.
- After calling the swimmers onto the blocks and surveying the field for correct toe position and readiness, the Starter should also identify any swimmers who have not put their goggles on and direct them to do so with, "Lane X, goggles."
- After giving the "Take your mark" command, if there are any problems that need to be corrected, the Starter should release the field with the "Stand please" command. This command effectively puts the meet on hold until the Starter begins giving directions again. "Stand please" is used for both forward and in-water (backstroke) starts. It should be given calmly and more softly than any of the other commands and may be repeated once or twice to avoid having the swimmers react to the command as if it were the starting signal.
- Stepping the field down off the blocks is encouraged when there is a delay that will take any significant amount of time to resolve. The Starter can direct the field to "Step down please" and can add a brief explanation if needed so the swimmers, coaches and Clerks of the Course know there will be a delay.
- If swimmers are in the water for a backstroke event and there will be a delay, the Starter should protect the swimmers by directing them to "Relax please" and then ensure they do not continue to hang on the deck or blocks while the issue is resolved. Allowing the swimmers to hang by their arms for a significant length of time could adversely affect their arm strength or flexibility for the race after the delay ends. If the delay is going to be very long, the Starter should clear the pool.
- Occasionally, a coaching staff will petition the Deck Referee to allow a swimmer to swim out of their age group or with a different sex to get a time for a particular stroke. If this occurs, the Starter should make a notation in the meet sheet and notify the field that there is an exhibition swimmer in a specific lane to avoid confusion on the part of the swimmers, coaches, or spectators.
- The Starter should be vigilant for anything that might disrupt the start or distract the swimmers while they are on the blocks. This can take the form of teammates standing next to them between the blocks during relays, parents or coaches talking to them while they are on the blocks, swimmers from the previous heat trying to recover on the deck next to them, or any other number of unforeseen possibilities. These distractions must be corrected prior to proceeding.
- Of special note is excessive noise behind the blocks. Relay events and events with numerous heats bring many swimmers behind the blocks at the same time and the sound volume can become too loud and distracting for the swimmers to be able to



hear and focus on the Starter's directions. If the Starter perceives this problem they can direct, "May we have quiet behind the blocks, please."

- Loud encouragement from spectators and teammates while on the blocks can also affect a swimmer's focus or ability to hear the Starter's directions. If the Starter perceives that this is a problem, they should quiet these distractions by saying, "May we have quiet for the start, please.", and then wait patiently for the noise to subside. It should be noted that eventually the entire pool deck will become ABSOLUTELY silent if the Starter does not issue any further commands. The Starter should wait until this occurs before continuing.
- While the length of a meet is a concern for everyone, the Starter must balance the pressures to "speed things along, catch up, and keep on schedule" with their primary responsibility of Safety and Fairness for the athletes. Safety and Fairness must NEVER be sacrificed for speed. An efficient meet is quick, and a meet with few false starts is the most efficient. Many false starts can be attributed to the Starter not reading the field accurately and rushing swimmers into their marks or not allowing them to become set before the signal. Above all else the Starter must be patient and focus on the swimmer's needs. The meet length will take care of itself.
- Historically, Starters have provided stroke order when announcing Individual Medley and Medley Relays during the first couple of meets of the season for younger age groups. In recent years, this practice has become rare and eliminating it doesn't seem to have created problems. While Starters may provide stroke order for the first couple of meets of the season if they feel there are compelling reasons to (Coach's request, special needs, etc), they are encouraged not to. If uncertain, consult with the Deck Referee.
- The most challenging swimmers to start are the youngest age groups. The Starter should evaluate the field of younger swimmers as they step up and determine if they will need more patience, time, or direction to help them receive a safe and fair start. While the goal is to 'stick to the script', Starters shouldn't be afraid to provide more direction in these cases to help them understand what is happening and what is expected of them, especially in the early part of the dual meet season. Examples might include "Okay ladies, you're going to hear a whistle, then I am going to talk to you before we start", or "Let's all come down to our set position together and wait for the beep". Even though this is a deviation from the 'script' it will save time by reducing false starts and preparing the newer swimmers for future meets.



APPENDIXES

Uniform Directives Sheet – This single page sheet can be printed out and given to each starter as a reference on meet conduct and directives.

Table of Added Meet Time Versus Extra Talking Time – This page provides examples of time added to a meet in terms of extra time taken with each heat by adding extra words or direction.

Starter Meet Event Assignment Sheet – This single page can be printed out and used to conveniently assign and record events and heats for Starters during a meet.

List of Additional Starter Related Resources – This section provides additional resources for Starters beyond the contents of this document.



SAFE - FAIR - EFFICIENT

When the previous heat is about halfway across the pool from the finish, begin your directions to the field. As the last swimmer in a heat is between the backstroke flag (5m mark) and the wall, call the next heat onto the blocks.

Direction	First Heat of an Event	Subsequent Heats
Call swimmers behind the blocks	“Event 2, heat 1, behind the blocks.”	“Heat 2, behind the blocks.”
Call swimmers onto the blocks	“Heat 1, step up.”	“Heat 2, step up.”
Deck Referee	Wait for whistle and hand signal from Referee	Wait for whistle and hand signal from Referee
Identify the distance and stroke to the field	“Event 2, boys 9-10. 100 IM.”	“100 IM.”
	Wait for the field to be ready	Wait for the field to be ready
When field is ready	“Take your mark.”	“Take your mark.”
When field is set	Depress the start button	Depress the start button
For backstroke, call swimmers into the water	“Heat 1, step into the water and set your feet.”	“Heat 2, step into the water and set your feet.”

ALL SWIMMERS MUST BE GIVEN ENOUGH TIME TO TAKE THEIR MARKS.

To release the field if there is a problem after “Take Your Mark” is given (Even for backstroke).

“Stand please.”

If you need to remind the field to come down together.

“Let’s all come down together on my command and hold for the start.”

To clear swimmers from the pool.

“Thank you (or nice swim) ladies/gentlemen, please clear the pool.”

To adjust a swimmer’s toes to the front of the block.

“Lane X, toes to the front of the block, please.”

To announce a false start.

“Lane X, one false start.”

If a race is recalled, the Lead Starter and Recall Starter will hold the recall buzzer until the entire field has stopped. Make sure someone is assigned to use the recall rope (likely the Referee).



ADDED TIME FROM USING EXTRA WORDS

This chart provides estimated examples of the time added to a meet when extra words are used when addressing the field. It is based on calculations using the 2024 Championship Meet Sheets.

The average person's speech rate is between 2.0 and 2.5 words per second. If we take 2.0 words per second as an example rate, we can get an estimate of what extra words can do to meet efficiency by comparing two different ways to talk to subsequent heats of an event after the swimmers have been called onto the blocks.

"Heat two, event twenty, boys nine, ten, fifty-yard freestyle." (10 words)

As opposed to:

"Fifty freestyle." (2 words)

$10 - 2 = 8$ words 'extra' in the first line.

$8 \text{ (words)} \times 1 \text{ (second)} / 2 \text{ (words)} = 4 \text{ 'extra' seconds of talking in that heat.}$

4 seconds of talking in every heat on Friday would add 5.1 minutes to the length of the meet that day (purely of the Starter telling the field what they already know). Over the course of the three-day Championship Meet, doing so would add 43 minutes overall.

	Champs Race Totals		Extra time talking during each start beyond what's needed (in seconds).						
	Events	Total Starts	0.5sec	1 sec	2 sec	3 sec	4 sec	5 sec	10 sec
Friday	10	77	0.6min	1.3 min	2.6 min	3.9 min	5.1 min	6.4 min	12.8 min
Saturday	41	321	2.7 min	5.4 min	10.7 min	16.1 min	21.4 min	26.8 min	53.5 min
Sunday	54	243	2.0 min	4.1 min	8.1 min	12.2 min	16.2 min	20.3 min	40.5 min
Totals	96	641	5 min	11 min	21 min	32 min	43 min	53 min	107 min

All of this is intended to provide perspective on efficiency, not to dictate how many words can and cannot be said by the Starter. When circumstances occur that require extra words to achieve a Safe and Fair start for the field, use them. Starters are encouraged to stick to the script and minimize words whenever possible.



MEET EVENT STARTER ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Event Number	Event	Starter
1 - 8	100 yd Individual Medley	
9	6 and Under 100 yd Free Relay	
10 - 13	100 yd Medley Relays	
14-19	200 yd Medley Relays	
20 - 25	25 yd Free	
26 - 31	50 yd Free	
32 - 35	50 yd Long Free	
36 - 41	100 yd Long Free	
42- 47	25 yd Back	
48 - 51	50 yd Back	
52 - 53	100 yd Back	
54 - 57	25 yd Breast	
58 - 61	50 yd Breast	
62 - 63	100 yd Breast	
64 - 67	25 yd Fly	
68 - 73	50 yd Fly	
74 - 83	Free Relays	



SSL Season Start, 2025.

“Starting: Philosophy and Protocol” DVD is available at:

www.usa-swimming.org

Copy posted on YouTube:

<https://youtu.be/42ZYyePMWsg>