



Date: March 9, 2018
To: USA Swimming Member Clubs
USA Swimming Member Coaches
LSC General Chairs
LSC Permanent Offices
From: Jay Thomas, Chair, USA Swimming Rules & Regulations Committee
Subject: Backstroke Start Certification

In 2007, USA Swimming implemented a forward racing start certification protocol. Based on observation, coaches use their expertise to certify that each athlete is capable of consistently and safely performing shallow forward racing starts on demand in 4 feet of water (The minimum depth for starts in competition is 4 feet.)

At the 2015 USAS Convention, the USA Swimming House of Delegates adopted safety guidelines for teaching and performing backstroke racing starts. In 2018, the Operational Risk Committee's recommendations for Backstroke Start Teaching Protocol and Certification were adopted. The recommendations took care to keep this process as streamlined as possible for coaches. This new certification is now combined with the Forward Start Certification adopted in 2009. **The new requirement (Backstroke Start certification) is to be effective on May 1, 2018.** The 2007 Forward Start Certification protocol and 2009 rule amendment requiring a depth of 6 feet for teaching racing start remain unchanged and in effect.

USA Swimming worked with the American Red Cross (ARC) during this process and the ARC will update its Safety Training for Swim Coaches Manual in 2018. The updated materials emphasize the importance of appropriate safety measures in teaching racing starts, including the proper progression for novice swimmers for both forward and backstroke starts.

As always, teaching racing starts shall only take place under the direct supervision of a USA Swimming member coach in at least 6 feet of water. The definition of teaching racing starts now includes a requirement that a USA Swimming Member Coach certify that a swimmer is proficient in performing all racing starts. The certification process includes the completion of a Racing Start Certification Procedure and Checklist which is included as an attachment to this notice.

What follows is a list combining the previous requirements for the Forward Start with the new requirements for the Backstroke Start.

Attached as additional information and explanation of these changes are the following:

1. USA Swimming Safety Notice to Parents. This provides basic information to parents and emphasizes their responsibility in making sure their swimmer does not attempt to perform a racing start in less than six feet of water if they have not been properly certified. A copy of this Notice to Parents should be given to the parents of every swimmer and should be displayed prominently and regularly on team bulletin boards, web sites, in newsletters and in any new members packets.
2. Racing Start Certification Procedure and Checklist. This process is required to be completed for every swimmer. Additional information and requirements are shown in the attached document.
3. Frequently Asked Questions on Racing Start Certification. This should answer most of the questions that may arise regarding the certification process and use of the new Checklist.

This certification process is very important to the safety of our athletes and provides additional protection for our coaches in the event of an injury to an athlete. If you have any additional questions or need additional guidance regarding this, please contact Tom Avischious (719-866-3555) tavischious@usaswimming.org at USA Swimming Headquarters.



Jay Thomas

Chair, USA Swimming Rules & Regulations Committee

*\$ wedge if not training
must have record of cert. rec'd
& liability must be used*

Forward AND Backstroke Start Certification Requirements

I. Certifying Athletes for **BOTH** Forward and Backstroke Starts

A. For swimmers with less than one-year experience and for swimmers age 10 years and under:

The swimmer must have satisfactorily completed the appropriate forward racing start teaching progressions as set forth in the Racing Start Certification Checklists included in this document package. The American Red Cross Safety Training for Swim Coaches Manual has the Forward Racing Start Checklist and will include the backstroke learning progression after a 2018 update.

B. For swimmers with more than one-year experience and/or swimmers age 11 and older:

Certification is based on the coach's observation that the swimmer is capable of safely controlling the depth of his or her racing starts.

C. Backstroke Racing Start With the Ledge

If an athlete will use the ledge in competition, certification with the ledge is required. If an athlete will not use the ledge in competition, certification with the ledge is not required. The same age stipulations as in (A) and (B) above apply.

II. Water Depth (from Rulebook Section 103.2, page 45)

"Minimum water depth for teaching all racing starts, prior to certification, in any setting from any height starting blocks, from backstroke ledges or from the deck shall be 6 feet (1.84 meters) measured for a distance of 3 feet 3-1/2 inches (1.0 meter) to 16 feet 5 inches (5.0 meters) from the end wall. Teaching racing starts shall only take place under the direct supervision of a USA Swimming member coach and shall include:

A. All racing start instruction until a swimmer has been certified by his or her USA Swimming member coach as proficient in performing a racing start, and

B. Subsequent to certification, instruction which seeks to alter a swimmer's basic technique in performing a racing start.

Prior to certification, all racing starts must take place from a position in the water, regardless of pool depth. Subsequent to certification, practicing of racing starts may take place in water depth of four (4) feet (1.22 meters) and deeper.

III. In all cases, the certification is based on the coach's professional judgment.

IV. Each club is responsible for retaining, for three years, an electronic or paper certification form for each of its swimmers. There is no requirement that these forms be sent to an LSC or to officials responsible for any competition.

V. If a swimmer is certified at one club and then transfers to another, the swimmer must be recertified at the new club.



NOTICE TO PARENTS: RACING START SAFETY

To avoid risk of serious injury, no swimmer who has not been properly trained should attempt to perform a racing start, from either a starting block or the side of the pool, into less than six feet of water.

USA Swimming has implemented a racing start certification program where a swimmer's coach documents his or her professional judgment that a swimmer has demonstrated sufficient skill to safely perform a racing start into four feet of water in competition.

There are rare occasions when swimmers may participate in swimming competitions **not** under the supervision of a certified home club coach. In these situations, it is the parent's responsibility to make sure the swimmer does not attempt to perform a racing start in less than six feet of water if the swimmer has not been properly certified by the swimmer's home club coach to do so. (Additionally, should this situation arise, the athlete must be assigned to a certified coach on deck at the meet.)



TEACHING RACING STARTS SAFETY PROTOCOLS AND CHECKLIST

Before You Teach, Be Sure:

1. Swimmers can jump feet first into deep water, surface, turn around, level off and swim 10 feet.
2. Swimmers can demonstrate correct hand, arm and head position. Practice a tight streamline on dryland.
3. Swimmers can hold their arms in a tight streamline on a forceful push and glide underwater on their front for forward starts and on their back for backstroke starts.
4. You and the swimmers know the water depth. USA Swimming requires that you teach in a minimum of 6-foot depth.
5. Starting blocks are tightly secured to the pool deck and meet size and height regulations.
6. For backstroke start practice, have the swimmers slip into the water feet first with one hand on the deck. Swimmers should not grasp backstroke start bar while entering the pool.
7. Always be sure the landing area is clear of other nearby swimmers.
8. Prior to certification, all racing starts must take place from a position in the water, regardless of pool depth. Subsequent to certification, practicing of racing starts may take place in water depth of four (4) feet (1.22 meters) and deeper.
9. Local, state and municipal statutes, ordinances, rules and regulations, may have depth limitations in conflict with this section. The LSC and all Member Clubs should check for this at all times.

Teaching Forward Starts:

1. Instruct swimmers in the step by step progression BEFORE using the starting blocks.
PREQUISITE: Swimmers can hold their arms in a tight streamline on a forceful push and glide underwater on their front.
STEP 1: Sitting
STEP 2: Kneeling
STEP 3: Compact
STEP 4: Stride
STEP 5: Shallow Angle Start
2. Make sure swimmers can enter water with control at each step before moving to the next step.
3. Always have swimmers hold arms fully extended overhead during entry. Do not perform entries with arms at sides.
4. Do not perform entries over stationary objects like poles, lane lines or kickboards. (Note: Coaches with additional training might use advanced techniques in water at least 12 feet deep with experienced swimmers, by having them practice over a soft item, such as a noodle.)
5. **Note:** Local, state and municipal statutes, ordinances, rules and regulations, may have depth limitations in conflict with this section. The LSC and all Member Clubs should check for this at all times.

Teaching Backstroke Starts without the Ledge:

1. Instruct swimmers in the step by step progression BEFORE using the starting blocks.

Prerequisite: Swimmer can hold their arms in a tight streamline on a forceful push from the side and glide underwater on their back and adjust their hands to come to the surface at an angle.



Certification Criteria: The swimmer gets into position with the hands grasping either the gutter or the lowest bar on the blocks, as close as possible to the water's surface. The swimmer performs a shallow backstroke racing start following the steps listed on page 8.

Advanced: Once certified, coach may teach swimmer to use the backstroke bar, if in the coach's opinion the athlete is tall enough and strong enough to handle this skill safely.

2. Always have swimmers hold arms fully extended overhead during entry.
3. Do not perform entries over stationary objects like poles, lane lines or kickboards. (Note: Coaches with additional training might use advanced techniques with experienced swimmers, by having them practice over a soft item, such as a noodle.)



Teaching Backstroke Starts with the Ledge:

1. Instruct swimmers in the step by step progression BEFORE using the ledge starting blocks.

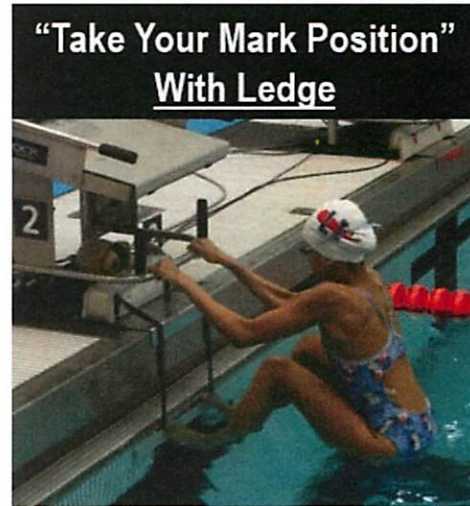
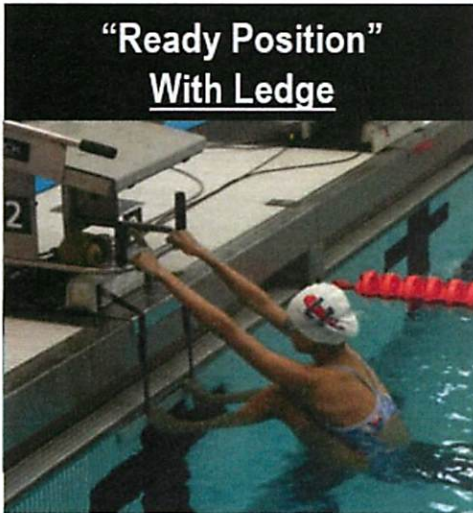
Prerequisite: Swimmer is certified for backstroke starts without the ledge.

Certification Criteria: The swimmer gets into position with the hands grasping either the gutter or the lowest bar on the blocks, as close as possible to the water's surface. The swimmer performs a shallow backstroke racing start following the steps listed on page 8.

Advanced: Once certified, coach may teach swimmer to use the backstroke bar, if in the coach's opinion the athlete is tall enough and strong enough to handle this skill safely.

Note: Research has shown that older, larger, stronger swimmers can generate more height, and consequently, the risk of reaching greater depths with the ledge is more pronounced with these athletes.

2. Always have swimmers hold arms fully extended overhead during entry. Do not perform entries with arms at sides.



Teach Your Swimmers the “Do’s” and “Do Not’s” for starts:

Do:

1. Use starting blocks and backstroke ledges only during controlled swim practice, instruction, supervised warm-up or competition.
2. Know the water depth and location of pool floor slopes. Use feet first entry if unsure.
3. Use feet first entry in warm-up and always enter at the starting end of the pool.
4. Look before entering the pool.
5. Enter the water only with permission of marshal at a meet or the coach at practice.
6. Use a shallow angle entry and hold arms fully extended overhead.
7. For backstroke start practice, have the swimmers slip into the water feet first with one hand on the deck.

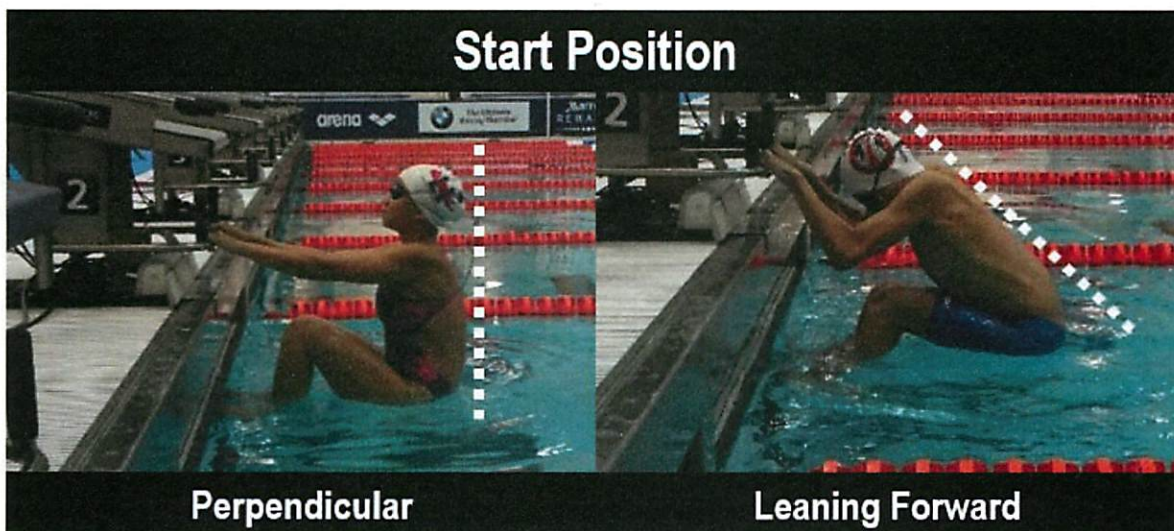
Do Not:

1. Start a water entry until the preceding swimmer has come to the surface and moved away from the entry area.
2. Do a head first entry into cloudy water.
3. Fool around on the starting blocks or the pool edge.
4. Attempt to abort a poor start or a false start by somersaulting, pulling up quickly or rolling to the side.
5. Attempt a somersault or flip entry into a competition pool.
6. Enter head first with the arms at the side.
7. For backstroke start practice, swimmers should not grasp backstroke start bar while entering the pool.

Teaching Backstroke Start (Detailed Protocol)

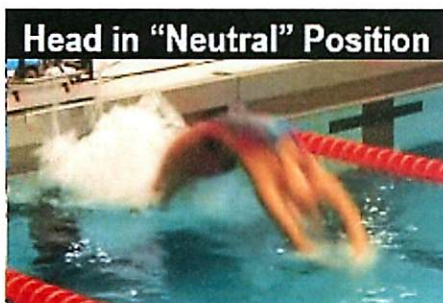
1. Grasp the pool edge at water level with both hands and place your feet on the wall, either parallel or slightly staggered. Arms should be straight and relaxed, eyes looking forward at the wall. Athletes that are older, larger, or stronger, that are comfortable reaching a bar on the starting block can do so, with the feet placed near the surface of the water.
2. On the command "Take your mark," bend your arms and legs to pull your body up and closer to the wall. Swimmers learning the start should just pull up slightly to a level that their strength can handle. Swimmers that are comfortable enough and strong enough to grip the bar can pull up more, with the hips at the surface of the water or just above.

Adjust the angle of your back so that your body is positioned ideally to jump off the wall while not slipping. With your back perpendicular to the water, you may be less likely to slip but your legs may be too tightly bent to get the best jump. To get to this position, bend your legs more to bring the hips closer to the wall or bend your arms less. Alternatively, with your back leaning towards the wall, you may be more likely to slip, but it may be easier to extend your legs to push away from the wall. To do this, bend your legs less to have your hips further from the wall or bend your arms more. This position may be better suited with a ledge.



The backstroke start position should be individual to each athlete, their strengths, and comfort. Try experimenting with different combinations of knee bend, arm bend, and back angle to find the best position for you.

3. On the starting signal, throw your head back to a neutral position generally in line with spine. Simultaneously press your hands from the edge or block and straight back over your head. Push forcefully with your legs to jump upward and away from the wall while arching your back and driving your body, hands first, up over the water. Kick your feet up to ensure they get over the water and you get into full streamline.



- Tip your head back and get into a streamlined position. The goal is to have a clean entry and maximize forward speed by not going too deep. Your hands should enter before your back, and your back should enter before your legs. To improve your entry position and depth, adjust how high and away you jump off the wall, and work on kicking your feet up. A higher jump may lead to a cleaner entry but may also be deeper too which is not preferred.
- Once in the water, adjust the angle of your hands and/or head for a horizontal streamlined glide. Straighten your back, to avoid a rear somersault.

Teaching Forward Starts (Detailed Protocol)

(From the American Red Cross *Safety Training for Swim Coaches* manual)



Sit on the edge of the pool with your feet on the edge of the gutter or against the side of the pool.

- Extend your arms over your head (Fig. 7-3).
- Focus on a target that will allow you to enter the water at roughly a 45° angle.
- Lean forward, try to touch the water and push with your legs.
- Straighten your body and extend both legs upon entering the water.
- Angle your hands toward the surface of the water to steer up.



- Kneel on the pool deck with one leg while gripping the pool edge with the toes of your other foot. The foot of your kneeling leg should be in a position to help push from the deck.
- Extend your arms over your head (Fig. 7-4).
- Focus on a target that will allow you to enter the water at roughly a 45° angle.
- Lean forward, try to touch the water and push with your legs.
- Straighten your body and extend both legs upon entering the water.
- Angle your hands toward the surface of the water to steer up.



- Starting from the kneeling position, lift up so that both knees are flexed and off the deck. The toes of your leading foot grip the edge of the pool and your back foot is in a position to help push from the deck. Keep your knees bent so that you stay close to the water.
- Extend your arms over your head (Fig. 7-5).
- Focus on a target that will allow you to enter the water at roughly a 45° angle.
- Lean forward as though you are trying to touch the surface of the water and use your legs to push off the deck.
- Straighten your legs and bring them together so that your body is in a straight line as you enter the water.
- Angle your hands toward the surface of the water to steer up.

Stride Position



Fig. 7-6 Headfirst entry from stride position.

1. Stand upright with one leg forward and one leg back, with the toes of your leading foot gripping the edge of the pool.
2. Extend your arms above your head.
3. Focus on a target that will allow you to enter the water at roughly a 45° angle.
4. Bend your legs only slightly while also bending at the waist toward the water (Fig. 7-6).
5. Lift your back leg until it is in a straight line with the rest of your body. Keep your forward leg as straight as possible as you lean forward.
6. Bring your legs together as you enter the water.
7. Angle your hands toward the surface of the water to steer up.

Shallow Angle



Fig. 7-7A To gain momentum for the dive, swing your arms backward and upward, letting your heels rise as your body begins to move forward.



Fig. 7-7B Enter the water at an angle no greater than 45°.

1. Stand on the edge of the pool with your feet about shoulder-width apart and your toes gripping the edge of the pool.
2. Flex your hips and knees and bend forward until your upper back is nearly parallel to the pool deck.
3. Focus on a target that will allow you to enter the water at roughly a 45° angle.
4. To gain momentum for the dive, swing your arms backward and upward, letting your heels rise and your body start to move forward (Fig. 7-7A).
5. When your arms reach their maximum backward extension, immediately swing them forward. Forcefully extend your hips, knees, ankles and toes, one after another, to drive your body forward in a line of flight over and nearly parallel to the surface of the water.
6. Keep your body stretched, with your arms angled slightly down and your hands interlocked in front.
7. Before entering the water, drop your head slightly between your outstretched arms.
8. Enter the water at an angle no greater than 45° to the surface of the water (Fig. 7-7B).
9. Once underwater, use your hands and head to steer your body upward toward the surface. Keep your body fully extended and streamlined while gliding underwater. Before losing too much speed, start your leg kick to rise to the surface and start swimming.



RACING START CERTIFICATION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Why did the USA Swimming House of Delegates implement the Racing Start Certification Protocol and Checklist for the backstroke start?

The experience of the USA Swimming's insurance companies and independent racing start studies have indicated that teaching racing starts (forward and backstroke) can potentially result in serious injury if not performed correctly. In response to these observations, USA Swimming made changes to the existing six-foot depth rule for teaching forward racing starts in 2007 and backstroke starts in 2015. With this addition, the definition of teaching racing starts now includes all racing start training (Forward and Backstroke) until the swimmer's coach certifies that the swimmer has the skill to perform a shallow racing start on demand into four feet of water. The Racing Start Certification Protocol and Checklist establishes criteria for that certification.

2. Who must be racing start certified?

Certifying Athletes for **BOTH** Forward and Backstroke Starts

a) **For swimmers with less than one-year experience and for swimmers age 10 years and under:**

The swimmer must have satisfactorily completed the appropriate forward racing start teaching progressions as set forth in the Racing Start Certification Checklists included in this document package. The American Red Cross Safety Training for Swim Coaches Manual has the Forward Racing Start Checklist and will include the backstroke learning progression after a 2018 update.

b) **For swimmers with more than one-year experience and/or swimmers age 11 and older:**

Certification is based on the coach's observation that the swimmer is capable of safely controlling the depth of his or her racing starts.

c) **Backstroke Racing Start with the Ledge**

If an athlete will use the ledge in competition, certification with the ledge is required. If an athlete will not use the ledge in competition, certification with the ledge is not required. **The same age stipulations as in (a) and (b) above apply.**

3. Who is responsible for keeping copies of certification forms?

Each club is responsible for retaining, for three years, an electronic or paper certification form for each of its swimmers. There is no requirement that these forms be sent to an LSC or to officials responsible for any competition.

4. Does the certification process impose more liability on coaches?

No. A coach's liability is already based on the coach's exercise of good professional judgment in deciding whether a swimmer has the skills necessary to safely perform a racing start into less than six feet of water (including racing starts into the USA Swimming minimum starting depth of four feet). Certification simply documents that for each swimmer, such professional judgment was exercised. Similarly, coaches are also already responsible for following the progression set forth in the American Red Cross Safety Training Manual to teach racing starts to young or novice swimmers. Certification documents that the steps in the American Red Cross Safety Training Manual have been followed.

5. What if a swimmer is certified at one club and then transfers to another?

The swimmer must be recertified at the new club.

6. What if my team does not have access to the Ledge for certification?

While this may seem a burden, the safety of all our athletes is the primary concern.

- a) An LSC could sponsor a clinic where clubs could come and coaches could work with their swimmers to teach, and certify them, on the ledge at a facility where a ledge, or ledges, are available. It may be possible for the LSC to purchase several ledges for this purpose.
- b) Several teams could share the purchase price of a ledge and share use of the ledge for practices.
- c) While swimmers can technically be certified during a meet warm-up (with at least a 6' depth), it would be a disruptive to attempt to certify a whole team in a sprint lane. Particularly in early season meets, host clubs can set a time prior to the meet warm-ups (day before or just before) when coaches can come work with their swimmers so they can become certified.

