

Becoming a Skilled Starter

Presented by Jeannine Dennis

Your job as a starter is to give the athletes the best start they've ever had every time you say, "Take your mark"... and give the starting signal. This is one of the hardest jobs on the pool deck. You may be fighting heat/cold, noise, equipment that doesn't work properly, conflicts between egos or personalities, new swimmers, or cocky 16-year-olds. So the key is .be prepared.

Get to the meet early enough to check the equipment. Talk to the coaches and athletes (this clues you into any problems that may be simmering on the back burner). Smile and give everyone the feeling that you are a calm professional that will be fair and responsive to the athlete. Get with your referee and discuss how you are going to handle the big **one** . a situation where everything goes down the tubes . kids are fidgety, your concentration is broken, lightening threatens or you just had a terrible start.

At that point, you recall the race, walk over, check a block, kick a pad, reset a machine, call the swimmers back up and start them again. Use common sense; do not penalize the field because you had a bad start. A good starter does not stand Out. The best compliment you can receive is for someone to ask you after the meet what you did.

Always maintain a calm demeanor. Never look or act as if you are nervous. It is contagious.

Be consistent. If you do not call a false start on a swimmer because he or she slipped on a block, you must have the same rules for all the heats. You can't call a false start on an older athlete "because they should have been able to catch themselves."

Know the rules: high school, summer league, USA Swimming, NCAA, or FINA. Do not start a meet until you review the rules that apply.

Never hesitate to stand a heat up if you see a problem, e.g. broken goggles, torn bathing suit, etc. Saving a swimmer from a disqualification is a heroic thing to do.

Time lines are there for a reason, but never hurry the swimmers for the sake of staying on the time line. You can usually make up the time later. Don't let a time line make you a bad starter. NCAA does **not** use a time line for that reason.

Keep your concentration. Be sure you watch the start; you would be surprised how many starters turn away to hang up the mike immediately after they push the button. Watch the swimmers at least to the false start rope. You may see a problem right after the start that you can nip in the bud.

Work with your referee, especially when few or no officials show up. Call his or her attention to empty lanes. Offer to help in any way you can.

We all have bad days. If you're not at your best, take a break. If there is no other starter to take over, then step back, take a deep breath, and try again. A positive attitude will help.

Be familiar with the equipment you will be using. Make sure the cords are long enough. Check buttons, guns, shells, transducers, bullhorns, whistles, bells, hand mikes, or omega boxes. Know how all equipment operates.

The first meet of the season may be difficult. Have patience with new deck and administrative officials and the athletes themselves. Take it easy, be calm, and use common sense. Don't rush; mistakes will be made. Smile and keep going. Make sure the rookies have a positive experience. We want them to be participating 10 years from now. The same goes for the veteran. Treat everyone with courtesy.

The meet begins; the whistle is blown. You are now in charge. Your job is to give the best possible start to the swimmers on the block.

Invite the swimmers to swim .don't order them.

You may say "step up," or "step up please," or "backstrokers in the water," "feet first" may be added, or "step in please." Use whatever suits your style.

Announce the event:

Ladies, 100 yard freestyle, or
Gentlemen, 100 yard freestyle.

I find when you use ladies or gentlemen, the athletes respond as such.

After a slight pause, state the command in a conversational tone, **not an order**. Begin the command in a slightly higher pitched but normal voice level and gradually lower your pitch.

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Practice in front of a mirror. Listen to how you sound. Is your voice calm? Very high pitched voices are hard to hear on a mike. Practice lowering the tone you use. Never use sharp commands. It can cause a swimmer to jump. If you need to stand the heat up, say "Stand please," very calmly and clearly.

On the backstroke after you say "step in," give the swimmers a moment to get set. Then the referee blows the whistle and you may give the command, "place your feet." This allows you to see if any feet or toes are above the water. Announce the event -"100 yard backstroke," and then say, "take your mark." This gives the backstrokers time to get set without too long a delay.

On warning the swimmers, use your judgment and common sense. If there is a problem, stand the swimmers up or down (backstroke), and warn the field. If a second warning is needed, identify the problem lane. If the swimmer still fails to respond, you may wish to walk to the lane to see if there is a problem. You really have to judge how to handle this by the caliber of the meet. My motto is “give the swimmer the benefit of the doubt.”

Be sensitive when dealing with disabled swimmers. Their coaches usually will talk to you before a meet to tell you of their swimmers’ special needs. A “legally” blind swimmer may be able to see a strobe, but may need help to the blocks. Deaf swimmers may need a hand signal or a strobe.

A good starter cares about the athlete BE A GOOD STARTER.