

The Starter

by John Lorimer (CSI Officials Chair)

Many of the questions I receive are "How can I become a good Starter?". Here is how I view the position. I should thank Jeannine Dennis for really making it clear to me what this subject is all about from a clinic she gave here several years ago. The starter in many senses has a different set of responsibilities than the rest of the deck crew. Their sole responsibility is to give the swimmers the best start they have ever had. The thing you should always keep in mind is that this position is **not** a "command and control" job. You are to invite the swimmers to swim and release them when they are ready. So in essence you are not starting them but the swimmers start themselves. When you and the swimmers are in sync, the swimmers will get the best starts they ever had. How this invitation to swim works is simple, use a conversational voice, just like saying "hello, how are you". In this manner the swimmers will respond promptly and steadily. A command voice can have the opposite affect that you want. The swimmers are expecting to hear "Take Your Mark" but not in a manner that takes them out of their concentration.

So let's say you get all of this down and the heat you are about to start a swimmer is just not into it and starts to move or is just way slow on coming down. Simply, just say "stand please". You do not have to single out anyone, in fact the less verbiage the better. With younger swimmers you could then explain that they need to come down in a prompt manner and hold. Also when dealing with younger swimmers make sure if you have to say something use terms they understand. So don't say "feet must be equidistant from the front of the block", say "your feet must be together and not at the front of the blocks". Now you bring the field down again and something else happens. Normally what I would do is then after saying "stand please", I would have them step down. This is especially true for senior swimmers who should get down and shake it off. Remember the senior swimmers will coil themselves up like a spring for that start. After the second stand they need to relax the muscles for a minute and get their head back into the upcoming swim. If you step them down it will give the referee a chance to see if anything unusual is going on that is causing the athletes to move or come down slow or whatever. The best thing I can advise you on is remember the athletes are there to swim, if you can prevent a false start, do so.

So what is the full starting procedure? Referring to section 102.14.2A the starter shall ask the swimmers to "step up", or in. I like to say "Ladies(or Gentlemen), step up (or in)." Then wait for the whistle. Now 102.14.2B "take your mark". With younger swimmers and no announcer I will preface this with the distance and stroke, but that is it. Again the reasoning is minimal verbiage. Hey if these athletes you are to get to the top level of swimming all they will hear is the FINA start which is a series of whistles and then "take your mark". The experience they get as they move up is to concentrate and listen for "take your mark".

So now you are starting a really big meet and the Meet Ref and the Deck Ref are breathing down your neck about time line and keeping the session under 4 hours. They have specified that the heat in the water will stay there and you start the next heat over them. No problem, you still take your time and in your relaxed manner step the athletes up with plenty of time before the previous heat finishes. The whistle blows and in your conversational voice say "take your mark" and off

they go. But if there is a problem you need to follow the advice I gave, which is no time line should dictate giving a bad start.

Next let's discuss what to do after a start and False Starts. I firmly believe that you should not put the mike down or lower the gun in the recall position until you are absolutely convinced that a fair start has occurred. If you put the mike down and something happens you will be fumbling around trying to get things stopped. Everything has gone perfect now the athletes have come down and hold and you hit the button and one of the swimmers jumps and there is nothing you can do. Recall the heat, then write down the lane that moved. Show it to the referee, the recall starter should do the same thing. There should be no verbal discussion behind the blocks. Remember you have athletes, timers, and others back there who are listening to every word. For you referees, you should always confer with the recall even if you and the starter see the same thing. After examining what you and the recall starter have written the referee can make a logical decision and continue on.

So final words of advice:

1. Always use a conversational voice and invite the athletes to swim.
2. Remember the athletes will start themselves given good circumstances.
3. Always strive to save a swim and give the best start that the athletes ever had.
4. Keep verbiage to a minimum.
5. Do not lose control by putting the mike down too soon or gun in your pocket, follow the swimmers out until you are sure there has been a fair start.
6. Allow time for the swimmers to get shaken out and their minds refocused if you have had to stand a heat several times by stepping them down.
7. Never draw attention to yourself. The best compliment you can receive is, as you are walking out after the meet, someone says " Gee, who started today? Things were going so great I never noticed." Or, "That start I had in the 100 fly today was the best I have ever had".