



The Deck Referee and Starter Team: Response to an Unfair Start

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A fair start is the expectation for and of our athletes. What happens when a start is observed to be unfair and one or more swimmers is disadvantaged? How does this happen, what are common circumstances leading to a false start, and what should the responses be from the deck referee/starter team?

The athlete count for the next heat has been verified and all have approached the block wearing their suit, cap, goggles, and perhaps a permitted wearable. The deck referee blows the short whistles to begin the start sequence followed by the long whistle as a means of instructing the swimmers to step up onto the blocks or into the water for backstroke. Both the deck referee and starter share observation of swimmer behavior, while the deck referee has the added responsibility of monitoring activity in the surrounding deck such as additional heats in waiting, location of timers and officials, safety concerns, and a second pool of competition. The deck referee waits to hand the heat over to the starter until it is determined that the swimmers are steady on the platform, meaning there is no evidence of imbalance. Some may have already established the placement of their feet or have bent down in anticipation, while still others stand completely upright. With the act of extending the arm, the deck referee hands over the heat to the starter who ultimately decides two things: (1) when to deliver the "take your marks" command and (2) when the swimmers are settled and set to activate the start signal.

The starter is steadfast in their focus on the field and trusts that the deck referee is not only attending to the swimmers, but is aware of any sudden or potential interference, or a report of such coming over their headset. A split-second decision must be made by the deck referee to instruct the starter to use the "stand" command (where their arm remains extended), or to have the athletes step down carefully (where the arm is withdrawn). Remember, the athletes may elect to step down upon hearing "stand." Whenever athletes step down, a long whistle should be blown again, thus allowing the swimmers to reposition themselves on the blocks.

During either of these situations, it is common for athletes to respond to the whistles intended for the other heat/pool. Instructions to chief judges and start-end judges should be part of each protocol briefing and requires vigilance during all sessions. The deck referee may be involved in another issue and unable to radio the nearest chief judge so the starter must be attentive and notify the deck referee of this unintended activity of the swimmers. The start-end judges or the chief judge should be ready to ask a swimmer to step off the block knowing that the starter's use of the microphone for this instruction has the potential to disrupt the heat that is waiting for their start signal in the other pool or at the other end during chase starts. If ever there is a time when the confused athlete from the heat in-waiting steps up then reacts to both the "take your marks" command and the start signal before a judge can stop them, the recall button is not to be used. The heat that is correctly going off the blocks or may already be in the water is likely to react to the recall sound. Now, there are two heats compromised. Try to stop the ones who mistakenly started their race and allow that heat to swim at the end of the event or at a different time during the session. If the start sequence has not begun with the short whistles, or there is no long

whistle, or a “take your marks” command has not been given, a swimmer who inadvertently goes into the water is not charged with a false start.

Who has the authority to engage the recall signal? When should it be used?

In the case where a swimmer leaves the block before the starting signal without affecting the others in the heat, the race proceeds without interruption (101.1.3B). When a swimmer moves after being set but regains the stationary position prior to the start signal, there is no false start. The starter may choose to stand the heat or wait until all are settled to activate the starting signal.

The deck referee/starter team must be prepared to react quickly and judiciously when deciding to activate the recall button and its use should be a rare occurrence. If the recall signal is given, no swimmer shall be charged with a false start and the starter shall restart the race upon signal by the referee (101.1.3C). It is certainly within the jurisdiction of the starter to react independently or at the instruction of the deck referee when an unfair start has been determined. Some of the athletes may have left the blocks, remained on the blocks, begun late, or entered the water but looked up to see what others from the heat were doing. The swimmers may be halted in their progress down the course by a coach or fellow swimmer. It is common to see one or more athletes swim their entire race without awareness of the recall signal being activated. The deck referee and starter must discuss their observations and identify what caused the disruption (e.g., loud sounds, air or vehicle horns, sudden loud crowd noise, an object blown into the racing course) and when it occurred, which often comes just before or concurrent with the sound of the signal. Did those who swam their race have a legal start?

If the deck referee and meet referee consult and agree that either the entire heat or only some experienced an unfair start, it is reasonable that a re-swim be offered to all. Some may elect to keep their original time and others may decide to swim the race again at a mutually agreed upon time before the end of the session. It is important that the coaches be involved in the process and that they understand that those athletes in the re-swim must use their same lane and must accept the time from the second swim. Whatever the outcome, all parties are offered the fairest remedy afforded them within the rules. It is noteworthy to mention that the first start is most often a swimmer's best, and the field is the focus of any start.