



The Deck Referee and Starter Team: It's All About Communication

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No matter the size or level of the meet, the deck referee and starter must be a team that communicates well with each other. The teamwork begins when you are assigned to one of these two roles, whether it is for the entire session or a few events within a session. Even before starting your pre-session checks, you both should have a conversation regarding potential circumstances that might come up (e.g., timing system is reset, how the starter should communicate empty lanes or a full heat, how false starts are to be handled).

While the athletes are in the pool for warm-ups, the starter can check the integrity of the start system as the deck referee inspects the blocks. While the deck referee is inspecting blocks, they can also listen to the voice of the starter projecting through the speakers, checking for clarity. To avoid repeatedly saying "take your marks," the starter should practice it in the manner that they perform for the athletes by mixing the command with, "Lane 1, 2, 3..." The deck referee's feedback allows for the necessary adjustments to be made before the athletes are even on the block or in the water, and possibly on the ledge.

During this time, or in the minutes before the event, the starter is the first to pick their spot for the best view of all lanes. The goal for the deck referee in choosing their position is the same—an unobstructed visual gaze over the lanes. The deck referee must also, however, keep in mind that their outstretched arm, signifying the heat has been given to the starter, must be easily and peripherally visible. This is another example of the teamwork necessary to ensure the starter and deck referee maintain sight of all athletes at the blocks before the start.

The starter may report to the deck referee when the anticipated number of athletes are all present, or only when there is an empty lane, depending on what is established in the pre-session dialogue. For the forward start, the short whistles are blown and are followed within seconds by the long whistle to initiate the athletes' transition onto the blocks. Once the athletes are steady, meaning there is no evidence of imbalance on the blocks, the deck referee hands over the heat to the starter. It is now up to the starter to decide when to give the start command and the start signal.

If all is well, the two watch the swimmers enter the water before going into their distinctly different roles. The starter, who is aware of the amount of time the deck referee is spending processing calls, can be very helpful by providing information on which swimmer is trailing behind and anything of importance regarding athletes in the next heat. The deck referee can help the starter by their own demeanor and walking away to take calls. This allows the starter to calmly observe the behavior of the swimmers in the next heat.

Prior to the start, any issue that has the potential to create inequity may require the deck referee to retract their arm. The outstretched arm does not relieve the deck referee from full control of the heat. The deck referee can direct the starter to issue commands for the athletes other than the "take your marks" and "stand, please," commands that are specific to the starter.

If need be, the deck referee may ask the starter to “stand,” relax,” or have the athletes “step down carefully.” At this point, the field has been returned to the deck referee. The team may spend a moment in conference, take action if needed (e.g., determine false starts or fall-ins), and the deck referee blowing the long whistle to bring the heat back onto the blocks. The starter is equally responsible for making sure that the athletes are settling and are not distracted. In some instances, the command to stand is used at the discretion of the starter if the starter feels that there may be the possibility of inequity at the start while the arm of the deck referee remains extended.

Should a false start or fall-in occur, both the starter and deck referee mark their heat sheets independent of one another. The starter initiates the call by approaching the deck referee, observing first whether radio communication is taking place. The starter uses a phrase such as “I have a potential...” or “did you see anything?” that will get the deck referee’s attention. The two show their sheet with the markings on the lane of the swimmer who committed the false start, thus solidifying the independence of their calls.

In summary, the goal of effective communication between the starter and deck referee is to develop a team approach to ensure the best possible outcome for the athletes we serve.