

# TIP OF THE MONTH...

## BE THE FIRST ONE OFF YOUR BLOCK!

by Coach Tony Ackerson

This month we want to take a look at something that is sorely overlooked on many teams—the ability to react to the starting signal.



It's amazing to watch sprinters (or any swimmers, for that matter) practice for hour after hour, do gazillions of yards, weight training, etc, only to come up short in meets due to poor start reactions. Especially in sprinting, where the difference between first and eighth can be less than one-tenth of a second, the ability to start quickly is essential.

Don't make the mistake of looking at the great start specialists and think that this comes naturally to them. Most of our good starters will tell you that it is a skill that has been worked on since they came to us.



The secret to the good reaction is to always think *"hands first"*. The first thing that should move at the start signal is the hands. At the first possible hint of a start tone, pull hard on the blocks (we like to tell our swimmers to actually try to pull the block out of the ground!). The first swimmer to move the hands is almost always the first swimmer in the water.

To improve the actual reaction time, we like to do "reaction drills" from time to time, but they can easily be done at home every day. Sprint specialists should do them every day. They work like this:

Stand with your arms hanging down by your sides. Close your eyes. Have a friend/parent say "Take your mark", then give a start signal. The signal can be a verbal "Go!", or you can use different cues—a bell, whistle, anything, just as long as you know what the signal should be. At the signal, take your hands and clap them in front of your navel before returning them to your sides. The goal is to do this as quickly as possible, including the return to the sides. You'll be surprised at how quickly your reactions improve. You'll also notice that you become more disciplined about not false starting.

There are plenty of variations that can be done on this, such as multiple claps, or tagging hands with a partner. But the common denominator is to improve the hand speed, coupled with reacting to an audible stimulus.

It always makes me smile at meets to see our swimmers "out-reacting" the other teams. Even in the 50 free, if we have three swimmers on the blocks, it's a near-certainty that all three of our people will go into the water together, ahead of the rest of the field. So take five minutes away from the TV or computer tonight and invest it in something that could pay off big dividends in the future.