

# Potomac Valley Swimming



## STARTER

Potomac Valley starting procedures involve both the “whistle protocol” for having swimmers step onto the blocks (into the water for backstroke) and the “no false start” protocol. All PVS Referees and Starters must be familiar with these procedures.

### INTRODUCTION

The Starter is one of the most important officials on the deck. The Starter is in direct contact with the swimmers during a critical phase of the race—the start. Your actions can clearly affect the swimmer’s performance. Therefore, this position cannot be taken casually. Starting should be constantly practiced and improved.

The Starter is also the “next in command.” That does not mean that the Starter has any authority over the other officials on the deck. It does mean, however, that if the Referee cannot continue to officiate, the Starter will have to assume the Referee’s job. Consequently, Starters in Potomac Valley should be familiar with the duties of the Referee.

The Starter and Referee must work together as a team! The Referee may request the Starter to assist in various ways prior to the meet. Typical assignments may include making sure that a Chief Timer is appointed, sufficient timers have been recruited, and that they are properly briefed.

The Starter may also be asked to make sure that warm-ups are being properly marshaled while the Referee meets with the Stroke and Turn Judges. Therefore, it is important for the Starter to be familiar with PVS warm-up procedures (see Marshaling) and to be ready to either conduct a Timers briefing or to assure the Chief Timer briefs the Timers on all the essential points.

Starters must be guided by one dominant principle *be fair to all competitors and give the benefit of the doubt always to the swimmer*. This does not mean giving a competitor “a second chance”. That rationale leads to sloppy officiating.

The ability of a Starter to determine when all swimmers in a heat are set is a unique one. For every start, the Starter must assume responsibility for doing everything possible to ensure that the start is fair for all competitors. If the Starter believes one or more swimmers left early, the heat should not be recalled. The Starter must note the lane(s) of the offending swimmers(s) in writing on the heat sheet and report the infraction to the Referee. Remember, a False Start is only charged when the Referee confirms the call.

A swimmer should not be disqualified if a false start may have been caused by some external provocation such as a

sudden noise, a photoflash by a spectator or even poor starting technique. On the rare occasion when the decision is made to recall a heat no swimmer shall be charged with a false start.

### PREPARATION

Review the “Basic Concepts of Officiating” cited in the Stroke and Turn handout:

- Take officiating seriously, work hard at it.
- Work regularly at the job.
- Be professional in manner.
- Be in the proper attire for an official.

Equipment:

Starting Device—consists of an Electronic Timing System (ETS) starting device (with a horn starting signal and a strobe light). A Starter’s pistol is not used unless that is the only starting device available. The starting device should be located so that the strobe light is clearly visible to the timers. The speakers should be located so the starting command and signal can be easily heard by the swimmers.

Recall Devices—for the Starter, it is the recall signal (a warbling sound) produced by the ETS. It is activated by releasing and then depressing the starting button on the Starter’s microphone within 15 seconds of the start. The Referee will signal a recall with a whistle.

Connections—check the connections to the harness, the starting device and the Colorado Timing console before conducting a timer’s check. The starting device should be disconnected from the harness and the harness disconnected from the Colorado Timing console after a session has been completed.

Do not pull the mike cord through your hand. While the mikes have a shock restraint built in, the cord can still be dislodged and render the mike inoperative.

During a multiple day meet, if you are the last Starter of the day, check with the meet director to ensure that the starting device will be connected to the charger to ensure the device has a full charge for the next day.

If you are the last Starter in a meet, do not disconnect the mike from the starting unit. Roll up the cord and leave it on the machine. This prevents the mike from being misplaced.

If you drop the mike in the water, disconnect the mike and if available in the locker room, use the hot air hand dryer to dry out the mike. This can take a very long time so you will need to use a spare mike.

All of PVS harnesses have the start backup plug taped off to prevent use. This is not true in facilities using an in-deck plate system. Use of the start backup causes a discrepancy in the times recorded. **DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES REMOVE THE TAPE FROM THE HARNESS OR THE STARTING MACHINE.**

It is important that you become familiar with how the starting device is set up. You may have to change out a machine during a meet. The set up is very simple however it is easy to make the wrong connections and that will effect the times recorded and the way the device operates. The jumper connection from the starting device to the harness always goes into the NO receptacle in the starting device and the START receptacle on the harness. The speaker receptacles are clearly marked on both the starting device and Colorado machines.

## GENERAL PROCEDURES

### The Starter shall:

- Stand within 10 feet of the starting end of the pool and have a clear view of the starting swimmers.
- Position the starting device where the strobe flash is clearly visible to the timers.
- Upon a signal from the Referee (an outstretched arm following the long whistle), assume full control of the swimmers until a fair start has been achieved.
- Notify swimmers of the event and heat to be swum only if no announcer is used or the Referee requests it.
- Use the minimal commands necessary so that the swimmers always experience standardized starting commands.
- **Not** use optional instructions such as:
  - a. Stroke(s) to be used and the order of swimming them;
  - b. Number of pool lengths to be swum;
  - c. Notifying relay swimmers that all but the last swimmer must leave the pool immediately upon completion of their leg.
- If necessary, use supplementary commands, such as "Place your feet" for backstroke starts; or to advise the heat when a swimmer is attempting to achieve an initial distance time.
- Adhere to starting modifications the Referee may elect to use for swimmers with disabilities.

## STARTING

Say nothing beyond what is outlined here (do not say "bell lap event", do not tell relay swimmers to exit the pool at the end of their leg, etc.).

Announce if one or more swimmers in the heat are going for an initial split time. Say, "Lane x is going for a lead off split of 100 Yards" after the Referee's long whistle and the swimmers are on the blocks or at the wall.

### Forward Start.

The starting procedures under the whistle protocol begin with the Referee signaling the next heat to get ready behind the blocks, by a short series of **at least** four whistle chirps. For timed Finals and Preliminary meets where there is no

announcer, the Starter announces the heat number (can be event number or description and heat number). In a Finals meet, the announcer will announce the new event and heat and possibly the individual swimmers.

The Referee's long whistle signals the swimmers to step up on the blocks. If the swimmers fail to respond to the Referee's whistle, the Starter may direct the swimmers to step onto the starting block or platform with a simple command "Ladies/ Gentlemen, Step Up Please."

On receiving clearance from the Referee (a signal with an arm motion), check to see that the swimmers are ready. If the Referee drops their arm back to their side, relax or stand the swimmers. Do not resume until the Referee turns control back to you.

Once the swimmers are under your control, Paaauussee, take a breath, and say, "Take Your Mark" in a conversational tone. Remember you are inviting the swimmers to swim, not ordering them to do so.

Once the command "Take Your Mark" is given, the swimmer must have at least one foot on the forward edge of the block. While almost all swimmers will move to assume a starting position upon the command, there is no requirement to do so if at least one foot is already at the forward edge. This is an area where you should not nit-pick the swimmers. If someone's foot is not close to the front of the block, then you will have to stand them up ("Stand" or "Stand Up"). Then tell the offending swimmer "Lane x, you must have one foot at the front edge after the Command." There is no requirement for the swimmer to actually stand.

Give the swimmers adequate time after "Take Your Mark" to settle down and to ensure that no swimmer is in motion immediately before the starting signal is given. If too much time goes by, then stand them up ("Stand" or "Stand Up), let them relax, then say "Take Your Mark." When all swimmers have assumed a motionless starting position, give the starting signal.

Remember that you must be patient with the swimmers and not use the "Stand" command too often. If you must stand them up a second time, make a generic announcement about assuming the starting position without delay, then pause and say "Take Your Mark." If a third stand up is required, and it is the 2nd for a specific swimmer, then warn that lane. If more stand ups are required, and it is the 3rd for a given swimmer, then let the Referee handle it.

The Referee signals the next heat to get ready after the last swimmer passes under the flags or at their discretion.

### Backstroke Start:

The swimmers should enter the water on the Referee's first long whistle. If they have not done so, say "Ladies/Gentlemen Step In Please." The swimmers shall line up in the water, facing the starting end, with both hands placed on the gutter or on the starting grips. Upon the Referee's second long whistle, the swimmers should place their feet. If they have not done so say, "Place your feet."

On receiving clearance from the Referee (a signal with an arm motion) check to see that the swimmers are ready. If the Referee drops their arm back to their side, relax or stand the swimmers down. Do not resume until the Referee turns control back to you.

Give the swimmers adequate time after "Take Your Mark" to settle down. If too much time goes by, then stand them down ("Stand" or "Stand Down"), let them relax, say "Place your feet" and let the swimmers comfortably get in position, then say "Take Your Mark."

Prior to the command, "Take Your Mark" and until the feet leave the wall at the starting signal, the swimmer's feet, including the toes, must be in the proper position. Note: The swimmer is now permitted to have their toes above the surface of the water but the swimmer is not permitted to stand in or on the gutter or to curl their toes over the lip of the gutter even if the top of the gutter is below the surface of the water. Use only the mandatory wording unless one or more swimmers are in an improper starting position. If there is a need to make a correction, say e.g., "Lane 5 toes." Use concise terminology whenever possible. If a swimmer assumes an illegal position **after** the starting signal is given, it is a stroke violation, **not** a starting violation, and therefore it is the responsibility of a Stroke and Turn Judge.

#### **Relay Starts:**

Relay starts for the lead-off swimmer are the same as all other starts. The starts of subsequent legs of the relay are the responsibility of the Relay Take-off Judge.

#### **Deliberate Delay or Misconduct:**

The Starter, with the Referee's concurrence, may disqualify any swimmer from the event who delays the start by entering the water or by willfully or deliberately disobeying a Starter's command to step up on the blocks, assume a legal starting position, or for any other misconduct taking place at the start. Such disqualifications shall **not** be charged as a false start.

The Starter must keep a record of swimmers scheduled to swim who fail to report. It is the Referee's responsibility to determine if they should be barred from either their next event or the remainder of the meet, based on the meet announcement and PVS policy.

#### **False Starts:**

When a swimmer does not respond promptly to the command, "Take Your Mark," or starts before the starting signal is given, the Starter shall immediately release all swimmers with the command, "Stand up" (or, for backstrokers, "Stand down"), upon which the swimmers may stand up (down) or step off the blocks. A swimmer who would otherwise be charged with a false start may be relieved of the charge if the false start was caused by the swimmer's reaction to the command "Stand."

All swimmers leaving their marks before the starting signal is given shall be charged with a false start. (Note exception for deliberate delay or misconduct.)

In backstroke or medley relay events a delay of meet violation may be charged to any swimmer who fails to maintain feet and/or hands in a legal position after the first warning.

A swimmer shall not be disqualified for an illegal starting position at the start. Enforcement of the correct starting position is the Starter's responsibility. If not corrected *before* the starting signal is given, no penalty may be assessed.

The Starter may charge a swimmer with a false start only if the Referee or an officially designated Deck Referee has observed the violation and confirms that the violation occurred. A Referee *may* call a false start without an independent confirmation; however, such a unilateral ruling should only be made when a truly blatant violation occurs.

A heat is not recalled except for a bad start by the Starter, or if something has happened that the Starter/Referee feels caused an unfair start. (such as, a flash from a camera or a noise behind the blocks). In this case, call the heat back and start again. If a heat is recalled, no swimmer shall be charged with a false start, no matter why the heat was called back.

If there is forward motion by the swimmer(s) after the field is set and before the starting signal is given, the heat is allowed to proceed, and any involved swimmers disqualified at the conclusion of the race. This includes swimmers who may have been drawn off by the offending swimmer. However, if you accidentally recall the heat, there is no false start. Starters need to consider how to prevent themselves from recalling on a false start. Recommendations are to not let go of the start button, or immediately open your hand so you cannot initiate the recall signal.

Once the race has started, the Referee, and the Starter should independently record the lane(s) they observed having committed a false start on their heat sheet. The Starter will initiate the comparison of this information and if in agreement with the Referee, they will determine what lanes (if any) should be charged with a False Start. The Referee shall also directly notify any swimmer or his coach of a disqualification after the race.

**Warning Signal:** In all individual events 500 yards or longer, the Starter or a designee shall sound a warning signal (usually a bell) over the water at the finish end of the lane of the leading swimmer. When using a bell to signal the "bell lap" in a distance event, ring it from the time the swimmer comes under the backstroke flags, turns at the wall and returns to the flags. Use counting sheets and coordinate the lead swimmer with the electronic timing system operator if used.

## **STARTING DISABLED SWIMMERS**

Starters must become familiar with the procedures for starting athletes who have disabilities. USA Swimming Article 105 addresses officiating swimmers with disabilities. Referees and Starters need to be familiar with the guidelines and become proficient in their use.

For hearing impaired swimmers, Potomac Valley typically conforms to the guidelines presented under Article 105. The standard progression of four arm gestures is not as easy as it looks. It takes practice, and the Starter should spend some time practicing the sequence before the session begins. Pay attention to the fourth gesture, ensuring that the arm is dropped at the same instant that the starting signal is given, to the best of your ability. It is recommended that the Starter meet with any hearing impaired swimmers and/or their coaches, who have identified themselves, to review the starting procedure. If a swimmer or coach requests a modification to this procedure, every effort should be made to accommodate the request. The Starter's heat sheet should be marked to identify the hearing impaired swimmer's events, heats, and lanes, including any relays. It is also recommended that the Starter perform the sequence of arm signals for several heats before the hearing impaired athlete swims, in order to gain additional review and comfort with the procedure. This also affords the swimmer an opportunity to clearly see the procedure before he/she swims. It's helpful to make eye contact with the swimmer when he/she is behind the blocks, a heat or two before the athlete swims, and nod that you are aware that the swimmer is there. Additionally, the Starter must be certain that the strobe is positioned so the swimmer can see it easily. The referee may make further accommodations to assist the swimmer. **It is imperative that the Starter avoid doing anything that would draw attention to a hearing impaired swimmer or any athlete with a disability.**

## HINTS AND SUGGESTIONS

### *Equipment and Facilities:*

- Meet management should have a backup starting system set up on deck. Make sure it Works!
- Some means of voice amplification should be provided. The ETS comes with at least one external speaker and can accommodate more. Usually, because of crowd noise, it is advisable to use, at least two external speakers—one attached to the main system and the other at the opposite side of the pool
- Have Disqualification slips (for false starts).
- Have Duct tape and a tool to cut tape after attaching speakers to handrails, etc.

### *Things to Think About Before the Meet Starts:*

- Does the Referee need your assistance before the meet? Is it your responsibility to appoint the Head Timer, to see that a sufficient number of timers are available, and that they are properly briefed? Do you need to assist with marshaling while the Referee is briefing the officials or dealing with other matters?
- If the Colorado Timing System is being used, make sure the equipment, including the pads and buttons, is operating properly. The equipment should be checked when the warm-ups are over.
- What is the likely traffic flow on the deck? Take steps to make sure swimmers and others cannot walk in front of you and the Referee during a start.
- What additional instructions, if any should you give?

- Check the starting blocks, if they are not in proper working order notify the pool facility manager. This is a safety issue if they cannot be fixed, they shouldn't be used.
- What recall procedures will be used? Discuss with the Referee and make sure you know what the procedure will be. It will usually be the Referee's whistle.
- Where will Referee stand during the starts? Will it be different for backstroke starts? Will the Referee assist you in making sure the feet are in a legal position prior to backstroke starts? How will the Referee signal you if there are problems?
- Are there relays in this meet? If so, will dual confirmation be used for judging the relay take-offs? Does the Referee expect you to participate in this? If so, how?
- Does the Referee expect you to handle any extra duties (e.g., act as a Stroke and Turn Judge)?

### *Starting:*

- Keep track of the event and heat number. Mark each heat off on your heat sheet as it is swum. **Note Empty lanes**
- The Referee will obtain a projected "time line" before a session begins and periodically check to see how the meet's progress compares with the time line and adjust, if necessary. However do not allow this adjustment to rush the starting commands even if the meet is running late. The timeline is the Referee's responsibility. It is not fair to the swimmers and will likely lead to false starts, with associated delays if the Starter becomes hurried.
- Before the meet starts, if some or all of the events are not pre-seeded, coordinate with the Computer Operator and/or Administrative Referee and ask to be advised of how many "actual" heats there will be.
- It is the swimmer's job to report to the Clerk of Course (Positive Check-in) area—when used—in time for the proper lane assignment. If there is no Positive Check-in area or lane assignments have been posted following a check-in, the swimmers are responsible for ensuring that they are at their lane, ready to swim, when it is time for their heat.
- Get the attention of the swimmers. If swimmers get on the blocks or in the water before the Referee's whistle, stand them down and remind them to wait for the Referee's long whistle. This will help you maintain control of the meet.
- When using a second Electronic Starting System (ESS) at the opposite end of the pool from the timers for 25 Yard/Meter events (SC) or 50 meter events (LC), ensure no one obstructs the timers' view of the strobe light (often Stroke and Turn Judges forget this). PVS now has strobes which are external to the starting system that can be positioned higher. An additional speaker that the timers can hear improves the quality of the watch times. Be sure to check both systems before the beginning of the meet.
- Be prepared to give hand signals with your voice commands for hearing impaired swimmers.

- A calm conversational tone and voice inflection is critical. Speak clearly, distinctly and slowly. Do NOT shout or “bark” commands. That only tends to cause false starts.
- Do NOT preface the “Take Your Mark” command with any other words or phrases, such as “Swimmers” “Swimmers ready” “Ladies” “Gentlemen” or “Shake it out now!”
- The Starter has authority in conjunction with the Referee to relieve a swimmer of the responsibility for a false start if the action might have been caused by a reaction to the Starter’s instruction to “Stand.” This authority, however, should be used with discretion, to preclude abuse of the main intent of the false start rule.
- Do NOT attempt to compete with excessive spectator noise during the start. Insist on reasonable quiet. (Enlist the Referee’s help in enforcing this!)
- Avoid using a fixed timing pattern to your starting routine. (Solution: Respond to the swimmer’s actions and start the heat as soon as they all have achieved a motionless position).
- Continue to watch the swimmers for 10-15 meters after each start. Observe to make sure there is no doubt it was a fair start.
- When an Electronic Timing System is being used, inform the operator about empty lanes.
- Be sure the preceding race is complete before doing anything that would cause swimmers in the next heat to either enter the water or step up on the starting blocks.
- When using a bell to signal the “bell lap” in a distance event, ring it from the time the swimmer comes under the backstroke flags, turns at the wall and returns to the flags.

***Common Starting Problems & Suggested Solutions:***

- Swimmer not paying attention to the Starter, and takes their position late or not at all. (Solution: Stand the field and start again).
- Swimmer, who continues to move towards a starting position, never makes it; and eventually falls off balance. (Solution: This is not a False Start. Stand the field and start again).
- Swimmer who thinks they have the Starter’s “starting pattern” figured out and is trying to “jump the start.” (Solution: Either wait the swimmer out or call a delay of meet violation if swimmer is not following proper starting procedures).
- Swimmer who assumes a starting position very slowly, hoping to start on recoil just as the starting device is activated and, thereby, gaining a split-second advantage. (Solution: Normally just wait, after last swimmer is still, wait just a little more, then start. If deemed toooooo slow, stand the swimmers up—stand the backstrokers down—and caution the offenders.)
- Swimmer who does not change his position in response to “Take Your Mark.” The rules do NOT specify what the “starting position” should be other than that at least one foot must be at the forward edge of the starting block. (Solution: A swimmer does NOT have to

crouch down. The swimmer is only required to be stationary immediately prior to the start).

- Starter uncomfortable because swimmer(s) are looking at them. (Solution: Swimmers are not required to look straight ahead this would be very difficult for a hearing impaired swimmer. A swimmer may look at the Starter or anywhere else prior to the start! Starter must adjust and get comfortable with swimmers looking at them).
- Starter getting the laps mixed up in the distance events. (Solution: If the event requires a warning signal, count the laps yourself. Do NOT depend on the Timer or the Counter at the other end of the pool. USA Swimming does NOT require that each swimmer have a lap counter at the opposite end of the pool. Also, USA Swimming Lap Counters may visually signal laps to their swimmer in either ascending or descending order, and they may signal from the sides rather than the ends of the pool. PVS has forms for keeping track of the number of lengths swum. Use them. It is best to track each swimmer to make sure you spot a lead change versus lapping, check your count with the Colorado operator. Stay focused; don’t allow anyone or anything to distract you. If you don’t, you will lose count and run the risk of signaling the bell lap at the wrong time or over the wrong lane.



## PVS Certification Requirements for Starters

### Prerequisites

1. Age—18 years or older.
2. Attend PVS conducted Starter Clinic.
3. Register as a non-athlete with United States Swimming (USA Swimming).
4. Be a certified Stroke and Turn Judge in PVS for at least one year.
5. Be officially certified as a Timer—see Timer certification requirements.

### New Requirements

1. Serve on-deck as a trainee with a PVS certified Starter or Referee at a minimum of five (5) different sessions at a minimum of three (3) non-championship meets. Start sufficient heats at each session to allow Referee to evaluate performance.
2. Perform to the satisfaction of the Referee and have such performance reported to PVS on the PVS Official's Certification Application Form.
3. Starts must be favorably observed at the last training session by an official designated by the PVS Officials Committee to evaluate new Starters. See the link on website under Starter Certification Requirements.
4. Pass designated sections of the USA Swimming Officials tests with an aggregate grade of at least 90 percent.
5. Complete certification requirements within one year of taking the Starter's clinic.

### Recertification Requirements

1. Previously certified by PVS or another USA Swimming LSC as a Starter.
2. If from another LSC, fulfill all relevant requirements of the PVS Officials' Transfer Policy.
3. Work at least four (4) sessions per year at a USA Swimming sanctioned meet, at least two of which shall be as a Starter, and at least one of which shall be as a Stroke and Turn Judge or Chief Judge.
4. Attend PVS conducted clinic for Starters at least once every two years.
5. Pass once every two years designated sections of the USA Swimming Officials tests with an aggregate grade of at least 90 percent.
6. Retain valid registration with USA Swimming as a non-athlete.

**Certification is valid until December 31 two years following the date of issuance**