

## **TRACK & FIELD STARTER INSTRUCTIONS**

### **Instructions to Competitors**

The starter should give some brief instructions before the start of each race to ensure that procedures and expectations are clear to every runner. These explanations should be given about 2-3 minutes prior to the start, and be kept brief so as not to unduly distract the runners as they prepare for their race.

An example of instructions appropriate for sprint races (less than 800 M) for high school runners is as follows:

"There will be two verbal commands and then the gun to start the race. Please stand behind your blocks and, when I give the command 'On your marks,' come forward and get settled into your blocks without any delays. When everyone is settled, I will give the 'Set' command. Come up to a full, complete set position without any hesitations or slow roll-ups, and then hold steady and wait for the gun. I will not surprise you with a quick gun, I will hold you until I am satisfied everyone is still and in control. React to the gun; do not try to anticipate it. Are there any questions?"

An example of the starter's instructions for a distance race (800 M or more) is as follows:

"There will be one verbal command and then the gun at the start. Please line up about 3 meters behind the starting line and, on the command 'On your marks,' come forward quickly to the starting line, checking to make sure your toes are not on or over the line. When everyone is still and in control, I will fire the gun. If anyone goes down because of contact in the first 100 meters, we will fire a recall gun and bring you back to start you again. Are there any questions?"

(NOTE: Recalling because of a fall caused by contact with another athlete in the first 100 meters is allowed under NFSHSA rules.)

In each case you have reminded the runners of what the command cycle will be, and what your expectations are after each of the commands. And you have assured them that you will give everyone the opportunity to be focused and thoroughly prepared for the starting signal.

There will be occasions where individual runners in the shorter races will not use starting blocks. In such cases the starter should identify these athletes and give them additional instructions following the instructions to those using blocks. These competitors should be informed that after the "On your marks" command they should toe the line and stand relaxed until the "Set" command, since it will take some time for those using blocks to get settled into their blocks. Upon the set command they should assume their final starting position and hold steady until the gun is fired. Sometimes a runner in this situation will begin to move or fall forward before the gun, often because they lose their balance as a result of their feet being too close together. The starter or recall starter

should call the competitors up, suggest to the runner having the problem that a wider stance might solve the problem, and start the command cycle again.

### **Position of Starter and Recall Starters**

The primary factor to keep in mind is that the starter should, in most cases, be in a position where the entire field of runners can be seen in as narrow a field of vision as reasonably possible. The preferred view for the starter is more of a side view of all competitors, in order to catch any forward movement before the gun.

**Sprint races - straightaway.** For the short sprint and hurdle races on a straightaway, there are two usual positions for the starter. To provide a good side view of all runners, the starter may stand about 3 meters in front of the start line and about 8-10 meters back from the inside edge of the track. This allows more of a side view of all competitors to be able to detect any forward movement prior to the gun, yet allows enough of an angle to be reasonably able to detect slow roll-ups. Alternatively, the starter may stand about 8-10 meters in front of the starting line, near the edge of the track, or back a few meters from the edge of the track if there is sufficient room. This is far enough away to provide good visual contact with every lane, but close enough that the verbal commands can be heard by all the runners without having to shout, and it provides a more equidistant position with regard to lanes 1 and 8. Whether the starter stands on the inside or the outside of the track may be personal preference, or it may be dictated by the physical facility (e.g., a fence right next to the edge of the track on one side).

**Sprint races - staggered starts (up to and including 800 M).** If the starter is working alone, standing on the outside of the track beyond the starting line for lane 8 is preferred, so there is a good view down the line of competitors and they are all in a relatively narrow field of vision.

**Distance races (1500 M or longer).** For distance races the starter should stand about 5-10 meters in front of the starting line, either on the inside or the outside of the track. After the start of the race, the starter should turn and view the runners for the first 100 meters of the race, watching for the possibility of a recall because of a runner going down due to contact.

### **Starter's Stance and Mannerisms**

The starter must be the primary calming influence at the starting line. Body language can be critical, and therefore you should always appear to be a person who is in control and enjoying your job. Your stance should be upright and comfortable, so all your concentration can be devoted to the runners at the starting line.

### **Voice Commands**

The importance of the starter's voice control cannot be emphasized too much. A calm voice is one of the most important characteristics of the successful starter. The starter's

voice commands should be practiced regularly, so the volume or tone is consistent from the beginning to the final set command. Again, calmness is the key. The "Set" command should never be forcefully or sharply spoken, nor should it be drawn out. It should be a crisp, normal spoken command, just loud enough to be easily heard by the runner furthest from the starter. Yelling the "Set" command also will disrupt the atmosphere at the starting line. Care must be taken to maintain a calm, consistent intonation throughout the command cycle in order for all the competitors to hear and comfortably react.

## **Arm Signals**

**Starter to finish line (and competitors).** The use of arm signals by the starter during the command cycle is primarily for the benefit of the timers at the finish line, so they know when to expect the gun to start the race. However, arm signals also can be of assistance when it is difficult for the runners to hear because of crowd noise or if there is a runner with a hearing impairment among the competitors, or in cases where there is a significant distance between the starter and the runners and a sound system is not available.

Prior to the start of every race, there must be communication between the starting line and the finish line, to ensure that everyone is ready for the start of the race. The head timer should have a red and a white flag. The starter gives a long blast on a whistle to indicate that the starting line is ready to begin the race, and the head timer responds with a white flag if the finish line is ready, or a red flag if the finish line is not yet ready (after checking with the photo timer crew if automatic timing is being used).

During a sprint start the high school rule book calls for the starter to hold the arm with the gun in a vertical position when the command "On your marks" is given. With the other arm make a 360 degree circle from the side up over the head and back down to the side. After the runners are settled in their blocks, just as the "Set" command is given, the non-gun arm also is brought to a vertical position.

For distance races, simply raise the gun arm to a vertical position just before giving the "On your marks" command and keep it there until the gun has been fired.

If whistle signals must be used, the athletes must be given specific instructions about the signals prior to the race. The simplest method is to use several short blasts on the whistle to signal the runners to stand behind their blocks. Then one long blast signals them to get "On your marks." When everyone is in their blocks and motionless, a short crisp blast on the whistle signals the "Set" command, and then the gun is fired. The arm signals used throughout the meet should be used in conjunction with the whistle commands. If there is a need to bring the runners up from their blocks (because of a disturbance, etc.), use several short blasts on the whistle.

## **Reasons to Halt the Starting Process**

At any time during the cycle of starting commands, if the starter feels it is not possible to produce a fair start or he is not satisfied that the start has been fair after the gun goes

off, they may terminate the starting procedure. This is accomplished by calling the runners up from their blocks with a command of "Stand up", or recalling them with a second shot from the gun. If there has been any condition or circumstance at the starting line that could be a distraction to the athletes, it is the responsibility of the starting crew to abort the start and correct the situation, so all competitors have a fair and equal start. If there is any doubt that everything is not right, it is better to bring the runners up and start again, rather than hope the situation "really was not that much of a problem." The starter must always be in control and anticipate problems. If a noisy crowd is close to the starting line, ask that they help you out during the starting commands, 'don't snap the shutter on the camera during the "Set" command', 'don't kick the fence', and 'please remain quiet.' If you are courteous to the spectators, usually they will respond in kind.

**Sprint races.** The following are examples of situations that could cause the starter or recall starter to bring the runners up out of their blocks or call them back after a sprint start.

1. 1) *Runner's request.* At any time from the "On your marks" command until the gun goes off, a runner may halt the start of a race by raising a hand to request a delay. This can be done for any of several reasons; e.g., the blocks not being properly adjusted, dirt or dust blown in an eye, or crowd noise. But this should be for a legitimate reason. If the starter feels the athlete has halted the process for no legitimate reason, or to play 'mind games' with the other competitors, the starter should give the athlete a warning that a repetition of that act will result in a disqualification. It also should be noted that the athlete is not allowed to briefly raise the hand and then run out of the blocks. Technically, this can be considered a false start and should be charged as such. The athlete should raise a hand and wait for the command from the starter for everyone to come up.
2. 2) *Crowd control.* If the starter feels there is enough noise from the nearby spectators that it will distract the runners, or someone is playing a radio too loud, the command cycle should be halted until the situation can be corrected. Again, a courteous request to the spectators is generally all that is needed.
3. 3) *Starting block problems.* Some starting blocks used by schools can be difficult to set. Be patient, but firm in urging quick setting of the blocks, especially if there are many preliminary races to be run.
3. 4) *Fingers on the line.* If an athlete has settled into the blocks with his or her fingers beyond the front edge of the starting line (i.e., the fingers are on the white line), the athletes should be brought up and the offending athlete advised to properly place the fingers behind the starting line.

4. 5) *Obstructions on the track.* Once in awhile someone not paying attention will wander onto the track, or a piece of waste paper may blow onto the track in front of a runner, just as the "Set" command is about to be given. A runner may notice and raise a hand, or a recall starter may see it through peripheral vision.
5. 6) *Slow athlete.* Occasionally an athlete will be slow in getting the warm-up clothing off, or take too long in getting settled into the blocks. During cold or rainy weather athletes may wear several layers of warm-ups, so a special effort should be made to ensure removing them does not delay everyone. The starter can help forestall this problem by telling them to get their sweats off a little earlier than normal in such weather. Once the "On your marks" command is given, there is no specified amount of time before the "Set" command. It will vary, and the starter must be somewhat intuitive in feeling when it is the right time to give the "Set" command and when it is taking too long. Often sprinters and hurdlers have their own special routines they go through as they get settled into the blocks, and sometimes these rituals are still being performed while everyone else is ready in the blocks. If one or two athletes are holding everyone else up, call them all up and caution the individual(s).
6. *Slow roll-up.* During the pre-race instructions (whether given by the starter or the clerk), the athletes should be told that on the "Set" command they are to come immediately up to the full and final set position without any hesitation or slow roll-up. If a slow roll-up does occur, the runners should all be called up immediately and the individual cautioned.
7. *Bad shell/misfire.* If the gun malfunctions, or a shell is a dud, the runners should immediately be called up and the problem corrected, then the runners called to their marks again.
8. *Flinch or buck.* During the momentary hold at the peak of the set position, a runner may "flinch" or "buck" yet not break contact with the ground with the hands or break contact with the blocks. This action will cause the runner to move slightly forward or upward and then slightly back. If the runner who flinches draws a runner to either side into a false start, the runner who flinched should be charged, since by his actions he has "disturb[ed] other competitors in the race through sound or otherwise". If the flinch occurs early in the pause between the "Set" command and the gun, it may be possible for the starter to "wait it out" and let everyone stabilize before the gun is fired. If the flinch occurs late in the pause before the gun, or if more than one runner flinches, the starter (or the recall

starter) should call everyone up, calm the athletes down, and start the command cycle again. This is basic preventive officiating, giving the athletes the benefit of the doubt.

9. *Slipped blocks.* The two primary ways of immediately detecting slipped blocks are by the clattering sound they make when they slip, or by noting a runner stumbling or seeming to hesitate awkwardly when coming out of the blocks. Often it can be seen that a pair of blocks is positioned considerably further back compared with the others, after the runners have left their marks. This is another major clue to look for to determine whether or not blocks have slipped. When slipped blocks are detected, the race should be recalled immediately, the runner involved given time to readjust the blocks and time to refocus on the start, and the command cycle started again.

**Distance races.** The following are examples of situations where the start should be halted or the runners recalled during the start of a distance race.

1) *Runners not steady.* If the runners are not steady or still after coming up to the starting line, they should be brought up and reminded to stay still on the line until the gun is fired. The start also should be halted if a runner is off balance and is falling forward. In these situations the runners should be brought up off their marks by the command "Stand up," given a quick explanation, and set back three meters for another walk up start.

2) *Toes on the line.* When the runners come to the line in a walk up start, if one or more runners have a toe on or over the line, the runners should be brought up and reminded to keep their toes behind the starting line, and then set back for another walk up start. Again, this is basic preventive officiating.

3) *Fall during the first 100 meters.* If a runner falls because of contact with another runner anywhere during the first 100 meters of a distance race, the race should be recalled, the runners given a chance to catch their breath and refocus, and then set up for another walk up start. If a runner goes down without contact with another runner, or because of stepping on the inside rail (without being pushed by another runner), the race should not be recalled.

In all cases, for both sprint starts and for distance starts, the best "rule of thumb" is common sense. If the starter or the recall starter feels someone is at a disadvantage, the race should be recalled or the start halted. If there is any doubt, start the race again. Just because a recall gun has been fired does not automatically mean someone has to be charged with a false start or disqualified.

### **Pulling the Trigger**

Pulling the trigger to start the race is the *sine qua non* of the starter's trade. During the command cycle, the gun should be cocked just before the "On your marks" command is given. The finger should be closed around the trigger, taking out any slack, and then the "Set" command is given. At this point the gun may be fired, or the pressure may be let up on the trigger if the runners must be called up off their marks. The starter should avoid jerking the trigger when firing, because the hand moves and this can be distracting to the timers. It also provides a visual cue to any runners who might happen to be watching the gun. The gun hand should be held still and solid throughout the command cycle.

The "hold" is the length of time between the initiation of the "Set" command and the firing of the gun for races started out of blocks. *Any hold of less than 1.5 seconds does not allow the athletes sufficient time to get into the set position.* There are two activities that require sufficient time to occur between the "Set" command and the firing of the gun. First, the starter needs to ensure that all the competitors have come to a full and complete set position, and have stabilized or are still. Second, consider what the athletes must do in sequence: they must hear the "Set" command, respond to it by directing the body to begin rising to the set position, sense when the body has reached the correct position, stop body movement, make any final readjustments (many top sprinters have a tendency to "settle" slightly after reaching their top position, and you must wait for that settling to be completed), start applying constant pressure to the starting blocks, and then focus on listening for the gun and concentrating on the explosive reaction to the sound of the gun. While this becomes an almost automatic sequence with experience, this still takes a finite amount of time to complete for both the novice and the experienced competitor. Even with elite athletes, the amount of time this process takes can vary considerably within any group of athletes at the starting line. *If the gun goes off with less than 1.5 seconds of hold time, there is an extremely high probability that at least one runner has not had sufficient time to complete this process, and the starter has created a disadvantage for someone by firing a quick gun.*

### **False Starts - What to Look for and How to Handle Them**

A starter who has given adequate instructions to the athletes, gained their trust and maintained a calm atmosphere at the starting line, normally will have few problems with false starts, especially in high school where the "no false start" rule is in effect. Nevertheless, the starter should be alert and fully prepared to immediately respond to a false start every time a race is started.

The runner is not allowed to commence starting until after receiving the starting signal (i.e., the runner must *react* to the gun, not anticipate it).

A runner who begins movement out of the starting blocks before the sound of the gun normally will move the back foot and leg first, along with the opposite hand and arm. The starter will have to key on the arm and hand movement, since it will be more difficult for them to see movement from the legs. Upon seeing any movement out of the blocks on the part of a runner before (or with) the sound of the gun, the starter should give the "Stand up" command if the gun has not yet fired, or fire a recall shot if the starter's gun has fired.

Be aware, too, of situations like "flinches" or "bucks," or other extraneous factors (see the above section on reasons to halt the starting process).

If an athlete is to be charged with a false start, it is the starter's responsibility to notify that athlete. Keep in mind that there are many situations where there has been movement, but the runner does not have to be charged (e.g., extraneous noises, an adjacent runner flinching or bucking). Again, a competitor does not necessarily need to be charged with a false start every time there is a recall.

After a recall for a false start, a good starter will avoid the tendency to fire a faster gun on the second start. This is a common failing, and the starter should consciously and scrupulously adhere to the normal pattern of hold times.

### **In Conclusion**

Being a starter is a major responsibility in a track meet, and you can have a positive or a negative impact on the satisfaction and enjoyment an athlete will have in participating in the sport, depending on how well you do your job. Practice the skills discussed here, observe other starters, take the time to practice voice commands and use a stopwatch to time your holds, stand in front of a mirror to observe your body language and arm signals.

These will help with your mechanics. However, it still boils down to knowing the rules and using common sense in applying them. Again, all your actions and decisions should be focused on the good of all the athletes, the basic principle being to ensure that no athlete gains an unfair advantage over the other competitors, and no athlete has to compete under an unfair disadvantage.