

Ohio Association Officials Clinic Presentation



Characteristics of a Good Starter

The primary goal of any competent starter must be to ensure all runners receive a fair and equal start for each race. The Golden Rule for starters (and for all track and field officials) should be: *No athlete is allowed to gain an unfair advantage, and no athlete should have to suffer an unfair disadvantage.* The atmosphere at the start of a race can be one of ease and calm or one of confusion, based on the approach and the actions of the starter at the starting line. A competent starter is able to take command and remain calm throughout the starting process. This begins with the ability to give clear, precise instructions and the ability to give the starting commands in a strong but calm voice. This in turn will help relax the competitors and make them feel confident in the starter. If the athletes feel confident that the starter will provide a clean, fair start for everyone, without any quirks or distractions, that is one less thing they have to worry about, which allows them to focus more attention on their race. A good self-evaluation check for the starter (and any other official) is that if you leave the meet unnoticed, your job has been well-done. The attention should always be on the athletes. Officials are there only for the purpose of ensuring the meet is conducted according to the rules, not to “grandstand” or draw attention away from the competitors.

Characteristics of a Competent Starter

- physically fit
- mentally alert
- having good eyesight and reactions
- the ability to concentrate
- common sense and tact
- starter must be decisive, but not brusque
- a good starter must have a great deal of patience
- To be calm yourself; you must be able to project that sense of calmness to the athletes.
- On occasion a good sense of humor also is necessary.
- A competent starter should be relaxed and never try to overwhelm the athletes with his or her presence.
- A competent starter also practices preventive officiating. If a starter sees a situation developing that could result in a problem, he/she should do something to correct the situation immediately, before it does become a problem.
- Competent starter always gives the athlete the benefit of the doubt and no matter what the level of competition, whether a junior high meet, the Special Olympics, or a national championship, the starter should be able to project the feeling that these athletes are important and that this is the most important race ever started.

Pre-Meet Check List

- Meet with the chief clerk to confirm the process for bringing athletes to the starting line and to review the instructions the athletes will be given by the clerks.
- The starter and recall starters should get together for a pre-meet conference. If any members of the crew have not worked together before, this is the time for the starter to briefly review the positions of each recall starter for each type of race, and the communication signals between starter and recall starters
- Finally, the starter should meet with the finish line crew.
- When fully automatic timing is being used, check with the timing crew to confirm how they will let you know when they are ready for the next race, and how you will alert them that you are ready to start the next race.
- If there is an announcer for the meet, check with this individual to work out the logistics of when to start announcing race participants' names, so these announcements do not delay the start of the race. Usually this announcement should begin about two minutes before the scheduled start of the race, or right after you have given the order to remove the warm-up gear. And make sure the announcer understands that, once you have called the runners to their marks, an announcement should not begin until after the race has started (unless it is a call for quiet for the start).

Pre-Meet Check List

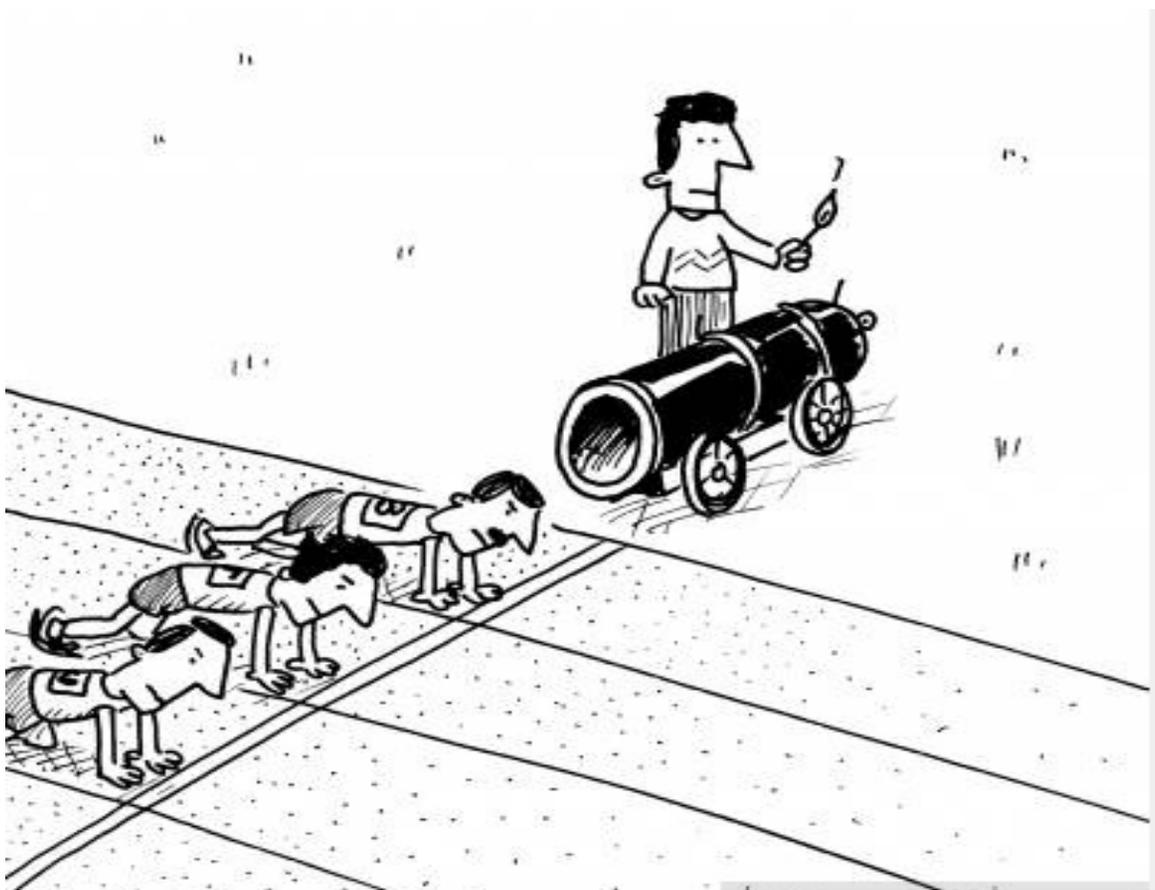
- Communication between the starter crew, the finish line, the clerks and the announcer, and an understanding of the need to avoid delays, are vital to keeping a meet running on time
- Since I have been a clerk for many more years than I have started, I have also found that as a starter if you were a clerk prior to your starting days, it's a benefit to you. I always walk the track even if I've been there before; you never know when they might decide to change the colors on the track surface. Lane 2 is your ideal walk 200 or 400 meter track.
- Use your own gun if possible, I was handed a gun at an indoor meet only to find out in not a good way, it had a hair trigger.

Starters – Observe & Do Your Own Job

- Remember you are the one with the gun, not the click board. Don't try to be a clerk; it's not your job, if you have a question, check with your clerk. If they have a question, they will come and check in with you. You **are not** the one giving instructions, the rule book tells us that job belongs to the clerk.
- My first meet as a starter was at Miami University at Oxford with Jack Woodruff. Jack started at Miami for many years and we needed another starter that year, he pushed me into the position. I would have been happy just to be a recall starter for the day, but that was not Jack's style. He believed you learned by doing so he had me starting the men that day. Not an easy task on a 10-lane track but Jack's patience and teachings has never been lost on this student. I have Jack's gun and each time I hold it, it feel him whispering in my ear, be calm.
- Another example working with Jack, we had several athletes that wanted to "play around" at the start, Jack called them all up, walked to the start line, had a conversation with the young men standing there, walked back to the starter's area and proceeded with the start. I asked Jack later what he said. He told me it was simple, the instructions at the start are commands, not suggestions.
- I have stated with a variety of different starters, Fred Thomas, John Hickman, Bill Schaller, Jerry Welch, Bill Buttermore and several others. Each has a technique of their own and I've picked up pieces and parts of all of them.
- I'm not here to tell you how to start but the components of a good starter. As I said, each of us has our own style and technique so be observant, watch a variety of starters, you can pick out the things you like and the things you want to avoid.

Past and Future of Starting

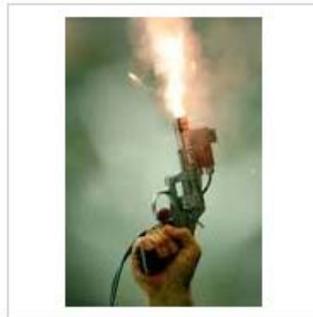
From what I can tell, no one seems to be sure when exactly we began using pistols to start a race (try googling any combination of “starter,” “gun,” and “race” and the results will be diverse to say the least) but the tradition dates back at least to the cowboy horse races of the early 19th century. As for the ancient Greeks, they didn't begin their races with the launch of spear or the blare of a horn but with a [system of ropes](#) that some scholars believe derived from the catapult. One cord was pulled across the ancient starting line at waist-level and another at the knees; when the cords were dropped the race began. This ancient starting system might actually be fairer than a pistol shot, as it completely prevented athletes from "jumping the gun" - or rope, as it were.



Current Open Barrel Gun



Future Electronic Versions



Modern starting pistols are more Buck Rogers than Dirty Harry

On your marks, get set, Go!” might work to start a race on the playground but in the highest-stakes world of the Olympic Games, where every thousandth of a second counts, even a gunshot isn’t fast enough to accurately and fairly start a race. Tasked with the job of ensuring that the world's greatest athletes are indeed the world’s greatest is watchmaker [OMEGA](#), who for the 26th time, is the official timekeeper for the XXII Winter Games. Under their, uh, *watch*, starting pistols and stopwatches have gone the way of togas and sandals.

Traditionally, starting pistols have taken the shape of revolvers and fire specially designed blanks that release a plume of smoke to visually signify the start of the race. Since the 1948 Olympics, these guns have been attached to electronic starting systems, beginning with OMEGA's “[Magic Eye](#)” timekeeping device, which projects a beam of light across the finish line that, when broken by an athlete triggers the timers and was accurate to the nearest one-thousandth of a second.

But there are some problems with starting a race with a literal bang. Most notably, fairness: the gunshot is heard by the nearest athlete, giving them an unfair advantage of a fraction of a fraction of second - a difference that matters for today's super athletes. This problem was first addressed by installing speakers into starting blocks that would play the sound of the gunshot at the same time for every racer, but there was still a slight advantage--a startle response--that comes with proximity to the real gunshot. Without any actual gun fire, the new system eliminates any possible advantage at the starting block.

Modern Starting con't

But in the wake of increased security concerns, starting pistols came under further scrutiny. Not only were they difficult to travel with, they could be used by criminals for intimidation - or worse. They're easier to obtain, don't have to be licensed, and can be converted to fire actual bullets. Regulations have been introduced to decrease some of these dangers, such as the 2006 British law mandating that all starting pistols be painted to resemble toy guns, but in 2010 OMEGA introduced a new solution that solves all these problems: a gun that isn't a gun. The Vancouver Olympic Games saw the first use of a new, electronic [starting pistol](#) that looks more like something from Buck Rogers than Dirty Harry. In 2012, it became the standard way to start a race.

When its trigger is pulled, the electronic starting "gun" does three things simultaneously: a light flashes, a pulse is sent to the electronic starting device, and a recording of a gunshot plays. I'm reminded of my friend's kid who recently asked why his phone makes a "clicking sound" when he takes a photo. The sound is, of course, a digital recreation of the mechanical shutter used by ye old film cameras. It's a type of audio [skeuomorphism](#). These digital gunshots are example the same thing. It's tradition. But it's also a signifier. It's how we know the race has begun. But really, any noise could be used to start a race - a duck quack, a doorbell, or a David Bowie lyric ("on your marks, get set, LET'S DANCE!").

By [Jimmy Stamp](#) smithsonian.com February 13, 2014



