

The Philosophy of Making Non-Routine Decisions at the Starting Line

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There are three rules that should form the foundation for any non-routine decision a starter has to make at the start line. Two of these rules have been around for a while, and one is fairly new in the rules book. The newest, added to the USATF Rules Book in 2017, is Rule 129.2: *“The primary responsibility of the Starter and Recall Starters is to ensure a fair and equitable start for all competitors at the start line.”* The same definition of a starter crew’s responsibilities is a 2020 addition to the WA Rules Book (Rule CR22.2). The two older rules apply before or after the start signal. USATF Rule 162.11: “Should the Starter or any Recall Starter not be satisfied that all is ready to proceed after the competitors are on their marks, he/she shall cancel the start and order the competitors to ‘stand up’.” (WA Rule TR16.5 has similar language.) USATF Rule 162.16: “The Starter or Recall Starter, after the start signal, who is of the opinion that the start was not fair...shall recall the competitors by again activating the starting device or sounding a distinctive recall tone.” (WA Rule TR16.10 has similar language.) In the US, while the high school and NCAA rules may not contain all these rules plainly stated, their intent is the same and the starter working at competitions under those rules should still use the approach to decision-making derived from these three rules and presented here.

The start team, with these three rules now in place, finally has the fundamental tools needed to reasonably handle situations at the start line that are not explicitly covered in a rules book. (The start team consists of the starter, recall starters, start referee and starter’s assistants; the starter crew is the starter and recall starters.) The key is the stated definition of the primary responsibility of the starter crew: Ensure a fair and equitable start for all competitors. ‘Equitable’ does not mean ‘equal’; i.e., the competitors do not all have to ‘react’ to the start signal at the same instant to the hundredths of a second. However, there should be nothing happening that disadvantages one or more athletes on the start line. If there is something disadvantageous happening, or even if there is any question or discomfort about the situation, the starter or recall starter should without hesitation use their authority to abort/cancel the start by calling the athletes up or firing a recall. Resolution is then needed, doing whatever is necessary using the tools and procedures the rules book provides (e.g., Start Information System or SIS, video review, running under protest, green card, yellow card warning, declaring an unsteady start). These tools provide the starter with the resources and flexibility to make difficult decisions with reduced risk of making errors. The focus must always be on making sure the start is fair and equitable for everyone. This is the essential element of our task.

The first step in the process of providing a fair and equitable start is a thorough understanding of what constitutes a false start. Through a long evolutionary process the rules now provide a fairly concise definition of a false start. These two criteria must be met before a false start call can be made:

- Initiating a commencement of a start prior to receiving the report of the starting device.
- Commencement includes any movement initiated before, or within 0.100 second after, the start signal and resulting in loss of contact of the hands with the ground or the feet

with the blocks. (This does not include movement that is stopped prior to the start signal and has not resulted in loss of contact; e.g., bucks/flinches.)

These criteria provide the basis for deciding whether or not a false start has occurred. If actions on the part of the athlete do not meet both of the applicable criteria specified by the false start rules, it shall not be considered to be a false start. Keep in mind that motion on the part of the athlete during any phase of the start in and of itself does not necessarily constitute a false start. When available as a resource, data from an SIS showing that a start was commenced prior to 0.100 seconds after the activation of the starting device can be used as confirmatory evidence of what the starter crew has seen (with the qualification that the starter and/or start referee do not suspect the data is providing erroneous information). The SIS evidence should not be the sole basis for charging a false start.

The definition of a false start is fairly objective; the definition of an unfair start, on the other hand, is somewhat more subjective from the starter crew's point of view. But since the starter and the starter crew have full control of actions at the start line, it is their point of view that is controlling in such situations. Anything that could be a distraction to the athlete, or the starter crew, or could interfere with or disrupt their concentration at the start can result in an unfair start. These situations cannot be cataloged here, but sensing them comes with experience. Standard procedure by the starter crew should always be to cancel the start if there is any possibility that an athlete suffered or will suffer an unfair start.

Understand that disqualification at the start line can occur for reasons other than a false start. Was an action by an athlete a deliberate attempt to disrupt the concentration of others? If so, a yellow card conduct warning should be issued. This could be a red card indicating disqualification on the first instance if it is an egregious action. Do not ignore more subtle conduct issues like slowly rising upon the 'set' command, or continuing to slowly drift down after reaching a peak position. Be proactive. Do not keep waiting for the athlete to finally get still; that is letting the athlete control the start line and the pace of your commands. It is the starter and the starter crew that must always be in control of the start by immediately calling the athletes up and giving a verbal warning to the offender. This will unequivocally establish who is properly in charge.

The starter crew (and the start referee) needs to understand when and why to use the yellow card as a conduct warning or a red card for a disqualification. There is, in effect, an unwritten hierarchy of conduct warnings available to the starter, from a verbal warning to the entire field, to a verbal warning to a specific individual, to a first yellow card warning to an individual, and finally, the ultimate, a red card disqualification for egregious misconduct. These are listed not only in the order of seriousness (least to most), but also in the order of how frequently they normally should be used (most to least). The verbal warning to the field generally is used in common situations such as when more than one athlete flinches or when the starter does not want to single out an athlete for a minor movement that caused a call-up. The verbal warning to an individual is used in more serious situations such as a major flinch or other disturbing action that causes a call-up, such as a slow roll-up or failure to remain still in the 'set' position. The yellow card conduct warning is used by the start referee (or the starter if a referee is not available). The yellow card can be requested by the starter, or the start referee can initiate this action. It is issued

for more disruptive actions by an athlete, an example being a major flinch that causes an adjacent athlete(s) to break (USATF Rule 162.17(c); WA Rule 16.5.3), or failure to respond appropriately to a previous verbal warning. In international competitions it is becoming apparent that many start referees are issuing yellow cards for even minor flinches or head movements. However, this should not be the practice at competitions below the international or national level (i.e., competitions not involving professional athletes). Remember, every time a yellow card is issued, all referees at the competition must be informed of who has received the yellow card. Other referees need to know in case that individual receives another yellow card, which will result in a red card disqualification.

The explicit responsibility now placed on the starter and the starter crew to provide a fair and equitable start for all athletes puts more focus on the starter crew's authority to cancel a start, either before or after the start signal. Historically, this authority has not been utilized as much as it could or should be. Any time a member of the starter crew notices anything that is potentially disruptive to the focus of any of the athletes (e.g., noise, movements such as slow roll-ups, bucks or flinches), the start should be canceled and the athletes ordered to stand up. If there has been any movement prior to the start signal, the athletes should be called up before the start signal or, if the start signal has been given, initiate a recall. If an athlete has stumbled out of the blocks, initiate a recall. Before or after the start signal, if there is anything that has caused discomfort on the part of any member of the starter crew or the feeling that something is not right, cancel the start. There should be no hesitation in canceling a start. It is far better to cancel a start and make appropriate fixes than to ignore a possibly disadvantageous situation for an athlete. The claims that 'they dug their own hole' or 'calling a race back because one athlete had a minor problem is unfair to the rest who were doing things correctly' should no longer be considered a valid rationale for inaction. Second guessing whether one action by a starter crew would be more disruptive than another is nonsensical. Unless an athlete was violating a rule, the athlete deserves an opportunity for a fair and equitable start, and it is the starter crew's responsibility to do whatever necessary to provide that opportunity.

Note that the three foundational rules presented in the beginning of this essay specifically name the recall starters as major participants in the decision making process. It is not just the starter alone who has sole responsibility. The starter crew is a *team*. While the starter alone still makes the final decision at the start line, any recall starter, as well as the starter, can initiate a decision-making procedure by standing the athletes up or recalling a race. Start line protocol requires that there be no lengthy 'discussion by committee' after a call up or recall; the recall starters should individually approach the starter and state their observations and then return to their places, leaving the starter to make the final decision after gathering all available information. The recall starters should and must have no hesitation in standing the athletes up or initiating a recall when there is any doubt of the fairness of the start.

The most obvious intent of the rules regarding starts is the explicitly stated responsibility to provide a fair start to everyone on the start line. However, a less obvious intent is to provide the start team with a number of procedures or 'tools' to utilize in order to minimize the risk of an erroneous determination of a false start, which is the most serious breach of the obligation to provide a fair start to each athlete. Among these tools available to the start team are:

- USATF Rule 129.4 (WA CR22.6) gives the starter crew not only the authority but the obligation to recall a race if any infraction of the rules is observed.
- As noted at the beginning of this essay, USATF Rules 162.11 and 162.16 (WA TR16.5 and TR16.10) give the starter crew the authority to cancel the start, either before or after the start signal, if anything was observed that might impact the fairness of the start. There is no time limit as to when a cancellation of the start can be made. Be aware that once a decision has been made to cancel a start, whether by the starter or a recall starter, all actions by the athletes after that point are not relevant to the situation. Only actions by the athletes taken before the decision to cancel are relevant and should be taken into account when making a decision. For instance, if a recall starter makes a decision to cancel the start because of a flinch, and an adjacent athlete breaks from the line as the recall starter is calling them up, that breaking athlete should not be charged with any violation since, at the time of the break, the recall starter had already made the decision to cancel the start. However, the athlete whose flinch caused the cancellation can be given a conduct warning. (USATF Rule 162.17(c); WA Rule 16.5.3)
- The addition of the Start Referee (USATF Rule 125.3; WA CR18.1, 18.3) provides an additional layer of expertise and oversight to help reduce the risk of erroneous decisions.
- In situations where an SIS is in use, rule changes have removed the SIS as the controlling factor in making false start decisions, and now designates the SIS as a resource to be consulted by the starter and start referee to assist in making a decision and to confirm what was seen by eye. If there is any doubt about the accuracy of the SIS information, the starter and start referee can now choose to disregard it (USATF Rule 125.3; WA CR18.3). This makes the SIS a much more flexible tool for use by the start team.
- The addition of the start referee also has brought about clarification of the distinction at the start line between issuing cards for false starts (done by the start team) and issuing cards for disciplinary or conduct violations (done by the start referee or the track referee). For instance, it is now possible to address an inadvertent movement with a verbal warning or a yellow card warning rather than charging a false start (see USATF Rule 162.17, and WA Rule TR16.5 and its commentary).
- A major new tool is the right of the athlete to run under protest (USATF Rule 146.4; WA TR8.4.1). A change in the USATF rule specifies that the starter/start referee shall allow the athlete to run under protest upon a verbal protest unless there is immediate obvious visual evidence of a false start. If there is no video or SIS available, as will be the case in most meets, then the decision is immediately made based on what the starter crew saw. If it is very clear there was a false start, do not allow the protest; but if there is any uncertainty at all, the best course of action that is fairest to the athlete is to allow the run under protest, and then take the time to examine all available data before making a final decision. This finally allows the track athlete to have the same rights a field event athlete has to protest a foul call and have the mark recorded until a referee can make a final decision.
- Finally, in situations where no clear decision is apparent or is likely to become apparent, the starter can always declare an ‘unsteady start’, which in effect is a cancellation, and re-start the race. This can be a very useful tool. Do not be afraid to use it when you need to, in order to resolve a situation in the best way possible for the athletes.

Using these tools when faced with a non-routine decision at the start line will help you arrive at a decision that is less likely to be erroneous or unfair to the athlete. Get familiar with them. Become comfortable with their use. Use them whenever necessary. In particularly difficult situations the starter should utilize the means to provide time needed to adequately consider available information, such as allowing an athlete to run under protest. When using an SIS, make sure the operator will always pull up the waveforms for every recall while the recall starters are providing the starter with their observations, so the waveforms will be immediately available when the starter needs them. The means to protect the athlete's standing in the event must always be in the forefront of the start team's mind.

This essay has presented a 'philosophy', or a 'mindset', for making difficult decisions at the start line. It is based on three key rules, and should provide the foundation of any starter crew's approach to handling issues at the start line. Based on the material presented here, the following procedures should be the standard practice for any starter crew:

1. Understand the responsibility of the starter crew and the full start team to provide a fair and equitable start for every race. *Any* observed abnormality should result in the cancellation of the start and the issue addressed and corrected.
2. The start team should not hesitate to communicate with the athletes. If there is a call-up or a recall, advise them of the reason when appropriate, and what needs to be done to correct the issue.
3. Be consistent. True consistency in the actions of the start team earns the respect of the athletes.

Following the recommendations presented here may require a shift in approach by many starters who learned their trade before all the current rules noted here entered the rules books. That is understood; however, all starters must keep up with the constantly evolving rules of our sport. We feel it is vitally important that all starters have the willingness and desire to do what is best to ensure fairness for all athletes at the start line, and incorporate these recommendations into their decision-making procedures in the future. Having a consistently equitable approach to decision-making on the part of all starters is fairest to the athletes, and fairness for the athletes is our ultimate goal.