

Canoe Sprint Competition Rules – 5. Starting:

A basic guide for Starters and Aligners

Of all the tasks to be performed among racing officials, that of the Starter is probably the most onerous. It is he (or she) who has a duty to ensure that all boats have a fair start. He decides all questions concerning the start of the races, and is alone responsible for decisions as to false starts. His (or her) decision is final.² Therefore, the Starter must have quick reactions, a good command, clear speaking voice, self-confidence, determination and patience, and be able to exercise impartial judgments.⁴ A calm and methodical approach can greatly assist clean and fair starts that are on time.

It is desirable, although not essential, for Starters to have some competitive experience in the Sport as they would have first-hand experience of problems the competitor encounters with the start. It would be beneficial if more ex-paddlers would officiate as Starters, provided they have the other qualities outlined above.⁴

When more than one Starter is employed, the start of the heats, semi-finals and final of the same event should be undertaken by the same Starter.⁴ It is also an advantage to competitors if the one Starter starts all events for the same group of athletes over the same distance, for example: the 1000 metre events for Men K1, K2 and K4.

No Starter wants to disqualify an athlete. By careful application of the starting procedure, the number of false starts and disqualifications can be minimal. Fundamental to good starting is that the start is part of the competition between the athletes and must never become a competition between athletes and the Starter. Few athletes wish to gain an advantage by jumping the start, they simply do not wish to be disadvantaged. A quiet, confident manner helps to relax the competitors so that they will not try to second-guess the Starter.

Records and Reports

A written record must be made of each event showing the lane numbers of any:

1. absentees
2. boat which caused a false start
3. boat eliminated by causing a second false start, and
4. boat starting without coming under the directions of the Starter.

A verbal report should be communicated to the Competition Committee at the same time. The written records must be handed to the Competition Committee after each sequence of events with a copy being retained by the Starter until the end of the competition.

Starting Equipment

To ensure that the starting equipment is in good working order, these utilities must be tested before each sequence of events:

1. communication with the Finish / Competition Committee
2. loudspeakers across the Course
3. the Automatic Start System if such is being used
4. the reception by each assistant who is to hold the stern of the boat (if individual headphones are used)
5. the reception of loud speakers at each start position
6. the VCR System
7. a large clock showing the correct time which is visible to the starter and all the athletes, and
8. ensure there is lane number indication (overhead or installed on each start position). No matter whether the lanes are numbered normally left to right, or occasionally right to left, each competitor's numbered lane buoy must be on their right.

Aligner's Duties and Aligning

As competitors paddle around the start, the Aligner checks the competitors' attire and completes the check as they come onto the start-line. He (or she) must check:

1. the correct personal number on the back of the competitor
2. the correct Lane number on the boat, and
3. that he has the correct number of boats.

Before a sequence of events, the Aligner must brief his assistants to explain the instructions they will receive and what is expected of them. The Aligner should adjust the line starting with Lane 1, then 2 and so on. However, if the Start Platform/Hut is on the right of the course and low to the water, he should start with those closest to him (Lane 9, then 8 and so on) in order for the alignment to be viewed and corrected more easily. To attract the attention of his correct assistant he should say the Lane number first, then Back, Forward, or Stop, as required. The Aligner should always recheck the starting line to confirm all is in order and only when satisfied, give his signal to the Starter.

All boats are required to be at the starting area in good time to allow satisfactory preparation for the start. (The starting area is defined as the area of water within 100 metres before the start-line). A boat is late for the start if it arrives in the starting area less than two minutes before the start time. It is also late if it arrives on the actual start-line after completion of the Aligner's initial alignment. Any boat failing to come under directions of the start must be eliminated from the race. (Please note, competitors must not be allowed to use gamesmanship in delaying coming to the start line by purposely holding back.)⁴

When aligning with an Automatic Start System, it is most important that the bow of each boat is correctly housed in the starting boot (or gate). It is very difficult to view this from the side. Therefore, it is good practice for two Aligners to be stationed in boats behind lanes 3 and 7. They should display a red flag as boats come to the start. When satisfied each boat is correctly housed, they should lower the red flag and raise a white flag. The Starter should then give the start signal without undue delay.

The Start

The starting command is now **“Ready – Set – Go”**. (The **“Go”** can be a shot or strong sound signal).

Provided the Starter is satisfied he must commence the start immediately he receives the Aligner’s signal. It is critical that the preliminary words **“Ready”** and **“Set”** are spoken in a calm and relaxed voice. The words must not be hurried, at least 2 to 5 seconds should elapse between **“Ready”** and **“Set”** otherwise a false start may be invited. This is to allow time for:

1. the athletes to prepare to paddle, and to be able to signal if any has a problem
2. for the Starter to ensure that boats are stationary
3. for the elimination of any oscillation or sway of the starting docks.
4. Please note, competitors must not be permitted to use gamesmanship in slowly taking up their start position.⁴

On the word **“Set”** competitors should place their paddles in the catch position without paddling forward and partly to give them better stability. The Starter must observe that all competitors are clearly ready to start with their paddles in the catch position, and they are motionless – not paddling. Ideally, the time delay between saying the word **“Set”** and the **“Go”** should be varied for each start from two to five seconds. This is not to trick the competitors but so that they may resist the temptation to anticipate the timing of the actual start command.

Once in the start position, athletes should not be made uncomfortable by too long a delay. They need sufficient pause for concentration but too long a hold will allow peak concentration to pass and excessive tension to develop, resulting in lack of confidence in the Starter and far too many false starts. Peak concentration takes about one-and-a-half seconds to develop.⁴ A very short or no delay (or regular timing between **“Set”** and **“Go”**) will encourage competitors to anticipate the start, resulting in many false starts and/or malfunction of an automatic start system (see Care with Automatic Starts below). A short delay should only be necessary in very adverse wind conditions.

If the Starter is not satisfied with the starting positions of the boats, he must call **“Stop”** and the start procedure should be recommenced with the Aligner repositioning.² In such circumstances, a false start should not be assessed.

If the starting signal is the word **“Go”** it must be loud and sharp.

False Starts

The same rules apply with or without an Automatic Start System. If a competitor starts paddling after the word **“Set”** and before or at the same time the start signal is given, he has made a false start.² (It not permitted to anticipate the start signal.) The Starter must immediately fire **two shots** or call **“Stop”**. The Starter is advised to check the VCR System to confirm his analysis before he gives the offending crew/s a warning. The Starter must be positive as to which crew/s actually caused (triggered) the false start, not which crew/s false-started. This process may take a little time. I know athletes wish to be informed as quickly as possible but it is a tragedy for a boat to get a warning incorrectly, so the Starter has to be sure his analysis is correct each and every time without fail. A warning may be given to more than one crew if the Starter considers that more than one boat caused the false start. If two false starts are made by the same crew/s the Starter must exclude them from the race. A warning and subsequent disqualification applies only to the crew/s which caused the false start.² To penalise others, who may have false-started through being triggered by the offender, would be most unfair.

To protect the interests of all participants, the Starter must allow ample time for all competitors to prepare for the next start without undue hurrying. A strong and authoritative voice is often necessary but a bullying manner must be avoided at all costs.⁴

The Starter must resist the temptation to shorten the holding time (Ready – Set – Go) for subsequent starts otherwise he will lose control and cause confusion among the athletes. They will be encouraged to anticipate the Start Signal or become nervous, perhaps feeling they may get left at the start. Other Starters at the competition will also come under unnecessary pressure.⁴

Whatever rules have been adopted throughout the years, the problem has always been that competitors try to anticipate the start signal partly because the absolute minimum reaction time to the start signal is a tenth of a second and probably closer to two tenths of a second. Anticipation of the start signal is no longer permitted. The competitor must not start paddling until the start signal is heard, they are not permitted to anticipate it. This means a competitor who starts to paddle at exactly the same moment the start signal is given has made a false start and in such an incident a recall is necessary.

Care with Automatic Starts

With an Automatic Start System, if the System fails **two shots** must be fired immediately to recall the competitors. Before any re-testing or re-pressing the control for the Automatic Start System, all boats must be well clear as very serious damage may be caused to a competitor's boat.

The whole idea of the Automatic Start System is to ensure all competitors have a fair and equal start. A fair and equal start has not been given unless all start boats (or gates) drop

at exactly the same time and also the exact moment the start signal is given. There are times when there is a malfunction of the system, when one or more start boots do not drop. A starting boot will fail to drop at the exact time of the start signal if pressure is applied to it, either against or on top of the boot. This pressure is generally caused by:

- a) the competitor paddling prior to the start signal, or
- b) by them starting to paddle at the exact time the start signal is given.

In both cases a fair and equal start has not been given to all competitors. It must be treated as a false start and a recall must be made. In either case a) or b) the competitor caused the false start and should be given a warning. If neither applies then no penalty should be given. If requested to do so, officials around the start can help the Starter by signalling to him with the use of their red flag if they see a boot malfunction.

This is an example of the Start process

Instructions / announcements must be given in English.² They may be repeated in French and German (*as indicated below*) but only if considered necessary. English only should normally be sufficient.

If there is no automatic start system competitors will need to be called to the start-line three minutes before the start to allow more time for the Aligner/s to do their job. Two minutes has been found to be sufficient time for an automatic start system.

The Starter must be totally systematic with his instructions / announcements and use the same wording with the same phrasing at the same times for each and every start.

Five minutes before the advertised time of the start, the Starter should announce the event as per this example:

“Race Number 37”

“Men, K2, 500 metres, Heat 1”

“Five minutes to Start”

“Lane 1, Algeria”

“Lane 2, Bolivia”

and so on.

*This announcement may be repeated
in French and German*

*Must be spoken in a calm, relaxed
voice*

Four minutes before the start:

“Four minutes to Start”

*This announcement may be repeated
in French and German*

Three minutes before the start:

“Race Number 37”

“Men, K2, 500 metres, Heat 1”

“Three minutes to Start”

(ditto)

At this time the Starter must confirm with the Competition Committee / Finish that they are ready to accept the race and only if so:

Two minutes before the start:

“Two minutes to Start”
“Please approach the Start-line”
“Lane 1, Algeria”
“Lane 2, Bolivia”
 and so on.

All boats must be in the Starting Area by this time
(May be repeated in French and German)
Must be spoken in a calm, relaxed voice

One minute before the start by which time all the boats should be taking position on their starting docks ready for alignment, or be close to the starting boats:

“One minute to Start”
“Come to the Start please”

Must be spoken in a calm, relaxed voice *(may be repeated in French and German)*

Start the VCR System.

Provided the Starter is satisfied he must not delay when he has the Aligner's signal.

“Ready”

Must be spoken in a calm, relaxed, unhurried voice

After around two to five seconds:

1. if satisfied boats are stationary
2. no crew signals they have a problem
3. there is no sway of the starting docks.

Do not rush

“Set”

After between two and five seconds:

1. if satisfied boats are stationary (motionless)
2. crews paddles are in the catch position
3. no one makes a false start.

Vary this timing between starts

Do not rush the Start

(If a competitor starts paddling now - before the start signal - **fire two shots** or call **“Stop”** to recall.)

Give the Start signal

If “Go” it must be loud and sharp.
Watch for any malfunction with an Automatic Start System and any anticipation of the Start signal

But if not satisfied or too long a delay say **“Stop”**, and allow the Aligner to reposition.

No false start assessment

In the event of a False start, the Starter must warn the offending crew/s:

Always check the VCR System to confirm your analysis of offender

**“Lane 6, England, False Start”
“You Have a Warning”**

The warning given should sound like a warning

The Starter must advise the Competition Committee/Finish of the false start and hand over to the Aligner for repositioning.

*Do not hurry the competitors
Do not bully them
In this second start the Starter must resist the temptation to shorten the holding time*

On the occasion of a second false start by the same crew/s, the Starter must call:

**“Lane 6, England, Second False Start”
“You are disqualified”
“Please leave the Start-line”**

They must leave the start before any new alignment

Following the Start

After the race has started the Starter should:

1. confirm with the Competition Committee / Finish
2. clear and rewind the VCR System
3. reposition the Starting Docks for the next race if necessary, and
4. reset the Automatic Start.

Starting of Long Distance Events (5000 metres)

The ICF Canoe Sprint Committee has produced guidelines for 5000m events, published under:

<http://www.canoeicf.com/icf/Aboutoursport/Canoe-Sprint/More-on-Canoe-Sprint/Technical-Information.html> and click on “Guidelines for 5000m”.

This document is dated June 10th, 2010 and on page 6 states:

Procedure of Start

- “Two minutes to start”
- “One minute to start” (Not “Start within one minute”!)
- “Go”
- Announcer may help starter

However, the 2011 Canoe Sprint Competition Rules² keep to the original start procedure:

- “START WITHIN ONE MINUTE” When the starter is satisfied that everything meets with his approval,
- “GO”.

It is this original procedure I refer to here. It is the system I prefer because it allows competitors to prepare for the actual start with greater comfort.

Competitors should be called onto the start-line three minutes before the start time to allow Aligners the time needed to do their job.

As boats approach the start the Aligners should raise a red flag. Only after being satisfied that all boats are on the line and each craft is being held in position should the Aligners raise their white flag.

The Starter must wait until he has the Aligners’ signal (white flag) that all competitors are on the starting line and each boat is held before he commences the procedure by saying, “Start within one minute” which must be said in a relaxed manner. On no account should the Starter commence the start procedure until all boats are in the correct position and everything is satisfactory for a clean and fair start for all competitors.

Although the start signal could be given at any time within the one minute, the Starter must allow enough time for competitors to indicate if they have a problem, (in which case the Starter must say “Stop”). Competitors also need to feel stable in their craft (with their paddles in the catch position), and need time for their mental preparation for the start. Therefore, the timing between “Start within one minute” and the start command “Go” should be at least 5 seconds and probably longer. The Starter must not try and trick competitors with the start command being immediately after “Start within one minute”. If these long distant starts are rushed they will almost certainly cause competitors to panic resulting in capsizes. If done correctly, with the competitors not being put in a situation to be able to anticipate the timing of the actual start signal, few false starts will occur.

If questioned by the Media

On no account must you discuss any incident with the media. Any incident is solely a matter between you and the Chief Official. Politely and courteously, you must make it clear that you will not discuss the incident. However, you can paraphrase or preferably quote any rule/s that may relate to the incident.

After the competition

- Keep a log, writing down any significant fact that you have learned.
- Analyse and evaluate your performance with a view to improving.
- Have specific goals for improving. No matter how experienced you are, there is always room for improvement.

I repeat that few athletes wish to gain an advantage by jumping the start; their only wish is not to be disadvantaged. The Starter must not become “Part of the Event” through poor practice and in allowing anticipation of his start command. It is very important that the official acts in a professional, competent, respectful manner to give the athlete the very best opportunity to realise their aspirations. They are entitled to receive the very best service the official can provide.

Rowland Jones
The British Canoe Union
I.C.F. Canoe Sprint Official

Compiled with the helpful assistance of:

Roland Lawler, former Chairman – BCU Canoe Sprint Committee

Günter Stahlschmidt, the German Canoe Federation, ICF Canoe Sprint Official

The late **Peter McCabe**, of the Canadian Canoe Association, and ICF Official

REFERENCES

2. “International Canoe Sprint Competition Rules 2011”. Publisher: The International Canoe Federation.
4. Richard Float “Starting and Marksmanship” (1987). Publisher: The Crowood Press for UK Athletics.