

Start Referee

There is much excitement in the start area of a race, where racers, coaches, spectators, media, gate judges, timing crew and course workers all gather before heading down the hill. Volunteers working in the start area (starter, assistant starter, manual timers & start ref) must all enjoy being around the racers, remaining calm, fair, warm and welcoming through a long day which may involve some confusion, tension and delays.

A good Start Referee is alert to all that is happening, quick to respond when necessary yet mostly unnoticed while things go well. It's important to have good radio etiquette, a good knowledge of the rules, the confidence to remain quiet or speak up when necessary, and a willingness to adapt quickly to change. A good Start Referee will oversee others working or observing in the start area and promote a positive, supportive atmosphere among volunteers, racers and spectators. Above all, the Start Ref has the responsibility to ensure that each racer arriving at the start gate gets an equal opportunity to perform and excel, no matter what their bib number.

The Start Referee is responsible for looking after the start area, making sure everything is set up properly, controlling who passes through while the course is closed, and assuring racers pass through correctly and safely when the course is open. The Start Referee follows the directions of the chief of race, communicates with others on the Jury channel, and initiates course clearance at the request of the TD or Chief of Race. The Start Ref remains at start area from well before the race begins until after the last racer is across the finish line and the course is officially closed. The Start Referee is a non-voting member of the Jury but must be prepared in case the Jury requires details about any infractions in the start area.

When does this job begin? Early! Ideally the start referee will join the early-loading group along with other members of the Jury and arrive at the start in plenty of time to confirm the start area is ready, to control pre-race inspections, and to test timing and radio contacts in plenty of time so as to avoid delay in starting the race. Plan to arrive at the start at least 15 minutes before the course opens for inspection, which may be at least an hour before the race starts.

When does the job end? As soon as the start referee communicates "course is closed" to all those waiting at the top of the course the start referee is free to leave the start area. Any offers to help with teardown or to carry equipment down the mountain are always appreciated. Remember to return your clipboard, radio and un-used bibs to the race office, and to keep notes of irregularities at the start in case the Jury asks for them later.

What does the start referee do? To follow are some notes on what I have learned over time, tips a Chief of Race may not have time to discuss, but details you might find helpful.

Before the race:

›If possible contact the Chief of Race before race day to go over expectations and routines for this particular race, and with this particular team. Attend the coaches meeting the afternoon or evening before the race to find out about any local rules, the schedule, possible snow seed, weather concerns and to meet the TD. On race day make early contact with the finish referee, the referee, the assistant referee, timers and the starter, because you will be working closely with them during the race and it will be easier to keep your radio chat clear and brief if you have already been in contact on the radio, or face to face.

›Pack your daypack with extras: an additional layer of warm clothing because you will likely get cold standing at the start all day, an extra jacket or small blanket to throw over a racer if the start is stopped, hand warmers, tissues, a knife, two pencils, a felt marker, a few pieces of blank paper in a plastic page cover, duct tape, electrical tape, band-aids, sun glasses, sun screen, lunch, liquids, and a spare pair of gloves that allow you to hold a pencil.

› Go to the race office to pick up your Start Referee package (race schedule for the day, list of local rules if available, several copies of start lists for both men and women, clip board and pencil) plus 6 forerunner bibs, and 6 spare (high number) bibs for any racers who may arrive at the start without their bib.

› Pick up a radio, and a spare battery if possible. Keep your radio and spare battery warm inside your jacket so they will last longer. The start referee cannot risk being out of touch by radio once the race is underway, particularly during speed events where a Stop Start must be carried out immediately to avoid possible collision and injury.

Note: It can be a good idea to use an earphone with your radio so racers will not hear Jury communications while in the start gate, particularly in speed events where reasons for a Stop Start could be upsetting to the racer who is about to depart. Turn your radio on right away, get familiar with the controls, do a test before you leave with the radio. **Be ready to do a radio check with the Chief of Race and other members of the Jury as soon as convenient, and ask the Chief of Race to review radio protocol on the Jury channel so you can practice communicating in a clear and brief manner before the race begins. Practice Racer Down protocol several times – never underestimate how imperative quick and clear communications will be in case of an accident.

›Arrive at the start before the course is scheduled to open for inspection and leave your pack at the start gate because once the race begins you will not be free to roam from this spot.

› Meet the Chief of Course and find out where racers will enter for inspection, then post a notice at this entrance which clearly states:

COURSE OPEN FOR MEN AT ___(time), CLOSED FOR MEN AT__(time)

COURSE OPEN FOR WOMEN AT ___(time), CLOSED FOR WOMEN AT__(time)

Note: Sometimes racers begin inspections through the start gate, but sometimes they are asked to avoid the start gate if conditions are marginal or set-up is incomplete.

›Check that fencing is in place around the start gate, and across the top of the course. Is there a shelter that needs to be erected? Are there any sponsor banners to set up? This has probably been done already, but some of the start area may require work due to overnight grooming.

› Post a copy of each start list (men and women) and the schedule on the fence outside the start area, and another copy on the fence nearest the start gate so that racers, coaches and spectators can easily read them. Hang on to several copies, even when coaches and racers beg for them!

› Take time now to check the start gate area, making sure the platform is has at least one ski length of flat snow so that racers can stand relaxed at the gate.

›Meet the starter, who is likely testing systems with the timing crew. Check that the start wand has been placed the correct height off the snow. Confirm where each of you will stand during the race, and that your radio will not cause static in the starter's headset. You may need to shovel out a platform. A small rug will help keep your feet warm. Make sure you will be able to communicate with the Chief of Race and keep tabs on medical or ski patrol.

›Clean up the start area if necessary, making sure the snow is free of needles or chemicals that could concern racers and coaches who have spent a long time waxing skis for this race. Check there are bamboo poles or small fences placed about two ski lengths back from the start gate to keep other racers from crowding the racer in the start, and that a more complete set of poles or fences have been set up further back to create a start corral to keep all but the next few racers well clear of the start area. Check that there is a protected area for racers and coaches to spread out equipment before and during the race.

All this will likely be prepared in advance but now is the time to make adjustments and confirm the layout will work.

During Inspection:

- › The Chief of Race should confirm over the Jury radio that “inspection will open in five minutes” and this is your cue to make this announcement in a loud voice to racers hovering at the start area. Take your clipboard, forerunner bibs and spare bibs with you and move closer to the inspection entrance. If you have not already done so, identify forerunners and hand them bibs, taking note of their names and home club so you can follow-up later if the bibs don’t come back to you.
- › At the designated time call out “inspection open for men” (or women, if they are first) then watch to see that all racers have their bibs with them for inspection. Most will likely hang their bibs around their necks rather than wear them as during the race, particularly the older racers. If a racer arrives at the top without his/her bib you may hand out one of your spare bibs but be sure to note the name and bib number of the racer, his/her coach and ski club/country as there is usually a fee charged for any missing bibs.
- › Manual timers will likely arrive during inspection so this is a good time to guide them through a practice session with the watches. If they are new to this job help them understand how important it is to be consistent. Help them find a comfortable perch so they can clearly see the racer depart.
- › Meet with the assistant starter, making sure that she/he has a start list and pencil, and review how this person can be of assistance. You will want your assistant starter to check bib numbers (sometimes racers don’t have their correct bib), help racers line up in order and in time, check plumbs for FIS or stickers for BC K1 races, and report any missing racers (DNS or late arrivals) to Start Ref. Inform the assistant starter what is planned for start intervals so she/he can be sure to have racers in line in time. Explain snow seed routines.

Just before the race:

- › Listen for another radio check on the Jury channel or call the Chief of Race for one.
- › Confirm timing is ready.
- › Confirm forerunners are ready, and that the first few racers are in the start area.
- › Confirm with the Chief of Course that course work is complete.
- › Re-confirm start time with the Chief of Race.
- › Complete clearance from the bottom up:
- › Announce: start clear
- › Chief of race confirms: you may start your first forerunner
- › Announce: sending first forerunner on the next interval, or in xx minutes/seconds

During the Race:

- › Announce on Jury radio: First forerunner in the gate, starting in XX seconds
- › Announce: First forerunner on course.
- Do not announce any other racers unless you are requested to stop the race*
- › Announce: Fourth forerunner in the gate
- › Announce: Fourth forerunner on course, this is our last forerunner

You may be asked to delay two intervals or longer before you start the first racer. There may be course work to be done, or a timing delay. After the hold you will be asked to conduct another course clearance before you send the first racer. Do not send a racer after a hold or stop start until the Chief of Race has requested and you have completed a course clearance. Each time you restart the race announce the racer (bib number) in the start gate, and again as soon as that racer is on course.

- › Announce: Racer One in the gate.

› Announce: Racer One on course

Do not announce any other racers unless you are requested to stop the race, and only stop the race when requested to do so by an official on the Jury radio, or the starter.

If you hear “stop start” immediately stop the racer in the gate by putting your arm out, or by stepping in front of the gate.

Immediately reply: Racer 18 in the gate, Racer 17 on course (or appropriate bib numbers).

Refrain from further comment while the rest of the Jury deals with the problem. Remain calm and relaxed. If you hear that the stop will last for awhile you may let the coach know so he/she can put a jacket over the racer in the gate, step out of skis or unbuckle boots. Do not let anyone know the cause of the stop start. Do not engage in conversation with the racer being held. Coaches do this.

Once the hold is over you will likely hear: send your next racer when he/she is ready. Offer the racer the choice of an interval or two to gain composure again.

Announce: Racer 18 in the gate, departing in xx seconds.... Then: Racer 18 on course.

In slalom races the starter will manage various start intervals and may even delay the start of a racer if a racer is down on the course, but this is not cause for an official ‘stop start’ and the Start Referee need not intervene or announce racer starts.

Be prepared to look for plumbs or stickers and note on your start list if these are missing. Watch that each racer stops completely in the start gate before departing, plants poles correctly, and starts within the correct time frame. Watch that each racer arrives in sequence, wearing the correct bib in the correct manner. (An experienced assistant starter will have done all this for you but it’s important to double check). Notice that the starter closes the wand after each racer, and sends racers on the correct interval. If volunteers are limited you may also be asked to be a gate judge for the first gate.

Also keep an eye on the start area around you, making sure other racers and spectators keep out of the immediate start area and remain behind fencing. Make sure the racer in the gate can concentrate, that other racers, coaches, officials and spectators are kept at a distance. Only one racer and one coach are allowed at the start gate, and only racers and coaches are allowed within the start area.

›Announce: Racer 65 (or whatever) in the gate, this is our last racer

›Announce: Racer 65 on course

› Listen for the last racer to cross the finish and for the chief of race to announce on the Jury channel that the course is closed.

› Announce out loud to all those at the start area: course is closed, you may go.

After the race

›Thank the volunteers around you! Help clean up the start area and participate in tear down.

› Return radio, spare bibs and start ref package (clip board etc) to the race office, along with any notes that might be used in sorting out a protest.