

On your Marks", "Set", Pull the Trigger... That's it???

By Raymond Pierre, Master Starter

Southwestern Association

raymondpierre@sbcglobal.net

You know, there's really not much to starting a race other than giving a couple quick commands and shooting a gun. Yet, in the wake of the Justin Gatlin turmoil at this year's Nationals, and all the light shed on us starters, it makes us wonder: Why is it that starters all over the world are continuously, incessantly criticized among their peers, in the various newspaper and magazine articles, over the internet, and on television? They held the athletes too long, or not long enough. They botched a judgment call, misread the false start apparatus, disqualified the wrong lane, didn't notice the blocks slipping, or the athlete holding her hand up, and then -- just when the starters about got it together, they pulled the trigger, and -- *click* -- forgot to reload the gun.

Maybe we're so vulnerable because the rulebook gives us unappealable power. Maybe it's because the starter is forced to wear a silly red blazer, in 90-degree heat. Or perhaps it's because we're "center stage for 30-seconds". Standing on a podium trying to appear to be made of stone, we know that for 30 seconds prior to each and every race, the athletes, the coaches, the fellow officials, the media, the spectators, and the volunteers have given us their complete, unwavering attention. Do our job right, and we're completely forgotten after the gun goes off. Slip-up just once... now we're dinner conversation.

Is being a starter difficult? Can anybody do it? Maybe, maybe not. Let's find out... I'm handing you my gun -- a .32 caliber pistol. I'm serious, take it. Handle it carefully, it's loaded. (If you already have a starter's pistol, humor me. This is still a fun exercise.)

Now that you're the starter, I want you to stand on this podium. Relax. Ignore the 20,000 people watching you, and the fact that this is a national championship race with professional endorsements on the line. Now I want to ask you some questions. This is a real time quiz -- meaning you must answer NOW. You don't have minutes to deliberate over it. Answer these questions properly and maybe you'll get out of this meet with a pat on the back. Slip up once, and the entire stadium will know it and you get "BOOO'ed". Ready? On your marks, set...

Question #1: (by the way, these are all true cases...)

100 METER DASH FINALS... THE NEXT PERSON TO FALSE START IS DISQUALIFIED: Just before you pull the trigger, lane 3 fidgets, but stays in the blocks. 1/10th of a second later, lanes 4, 5, and 7 all bolt out. You take your finger off the trigger and say, "Stand Up!". Who's disqualified? Quick, you've got 10 seconds to decide.

Question #2:

200 METER DASH PRELIMS, 2ND HEAT: Immediately after starting the race you realize you started them from the 800-meter starting line, not the 200-meter starting line (they do look very similar). Quick... what do you do?

Question #3:

110 METER HURDLES FINALS... NEXT FALSE START IS OUT: You just disqualified an athlete and he absolutely REFUSES to leave the starting line, and not only raises a commotion, but acts like he's about to charge after you. What do you do?

Question #4:

3,000 METER STEEPLECHASE FINALS: 40 meters into the race, an athlete gets accidentally tripped up by another athlete and falls. 3 more trip over him and fall. The rest get away. What do you do?

Bonus question: Same question, but the collision happened commencing a barrier jump at 40 meters. NOW, what do you do?

Question #5:

100 METER DASH FINALS... NEXT FALSE START IS OUT: You shoot the gun, and Uh-Oooh, the False Start Detection Device sounds off and the race is stopped. The Machine says the athlete moved .098 seconds before the gun. You think you should have been able to see such motion. But, all 3 pairs of assistant starters' eyes -- plus yours -- saw absolutely no motion from anyone, thus you disagree with the Machine. SO... do you go with the Machine, or the eyes? Time's up. Decide now.

ANSWERS: None of these issues are directly addressed in the rulebook. You're on your own. Welcome to the world of the starter!!! (Now, give me my gun back!).