

What is a False Start?

“My child was Disqualified for a false start. But he didn’t go into the pool before the others. I don’t understand!”

The false start rule can be confusing. The rulebook says, “Any swimmer starting before the starting signal is given shall be disqualified if the Referee independently observes and confirms the Starter’s observation that a violation occurred.” Let’s see how this rule is applied.

When the starter says, “Take your mark,” the swimmers are required to assume a stationary starting position without delay. If swimmers are taking too long to assume their starting positions and to become set, the Starter may tell the heat to “Stand,” and begin the sequence again. But once a set position is attained, any further movement may be considered a start. And if the movement occurs prior to the starting signal, it’s a false start.

The Referee and Starter must be in agreement that a false start has occurred. Each must independently mark the violation on their heat sheets; one official cannot “talk the other” into agreement. A false start is one of the rare violations that requires independent dual confirmation.

There are, however, a few things that can occur that are not considered false starts. For instance, if the swimmer has not yet become set in a starting position and loses balance in the process of getting into the position, a false start is not charged. If the Referee and Starter agree that the swimmer started in response to the “Stand” command, a false start is similarly not charged.

The starting signal consists of a light and a sound. For that reason, if there is an extraneous flash of light (flash photography) or a sudden loud sound at the start, a false start is not charged. But the starting signal does not move—if the swimmer starts in response to a movement (in the water, on another starting block), a false start can be charged.

If the false start is confirmed by both officials before the starting signal is given, the swimmer is immediately disqualified and does not swim the race. If the starting signal has been given before the false start can be confirmed, the race continues and the swimmer is disqualified upon completion of the heat.