

**Safety Tip of the Month – September 2009**  
**VSI Safety Committee**  
**“Teaching Racing Starts”**

With the start of a new season, many new young swimmers will begin competitive swimming. To help keep these young swimmers safe, new rules have been put in place by USA-Swimming concerning teaching racing starts.

To avoid risk of serious injury, no swimmer who has not been properly trained should attempt to perform a racing start, from either a starting block or the side of the pool, into less than six feet of water.

USA Swimming has implemented a racing start certification program where a swimmer's coach documents his or her professional judgment that a swimmer has demonstrated sufficient skill to safely perform a racing start into four feet of water. It is the parent's responsibility to make sure the swimmer does not attempt to perform a racing start in less than six feet of water if the swimmer has not been properly certified by the swimmer's coach to do so.

Effective May 1, 2009, USA Swimming's Board of Directors has modified the racing start rule, 103.2.2 (which already provides that racing starts should only be taught in at least six feet of water) to further clarify that racing starts should only be taught under the direct supervision of a USA Swimming member coach, and to expand the definition of teaching racing starts to make clear that no swimmer who has not been certified as proficient by his or her coach should be performing racing starts into less than six feet of water.

**Frequently Asked Questions**

1. Why did the USA Swimming Board of Directors implement the Racing Start Certification Checklist?

Answer: The experience of the United States Sports Insurance Company (“USSIC”) and a recent racing start study commissioned by USSIC observe that teaching racing starts can potentially result in serious injury if not performed correctly. In response to these observations, the USA Swimming Board made changes to the existing six-foot depth rule for teaching racing starts. Those changes included making clear that the definition of teaching racing starts includes all racing start training until the swimmer's coach certifies that the swimmer has the skill to perform a shallow racing start on demand into four feet of water. The Racing Start Certification Checklist establishes criteria for that certification.

2. What are the criteria for racing start certification?

Answer: In order for swimmers age 10 years and under and/or swimmers with less than one year of experience to be certified, the swimmer must have satisfactorily completed the racing start learning progression set forth in the *American Red Cross Safety Training for Swim Coaches Manual* also found on the Racing Start Certification Checklist. For swimmers age 11 and older with more than one year experience, certification is based on the coach's observation that the swimmer is capable of safely controlling the depth of his or her racing starts. In all cases, the certification is based on the coach's professional judgment — it is not and cannot be a guarantee.

3. What if a swimmer is certified at one club and then transfers to another?

Answer: The swimmer must be recertified at the new club.

4. Who is responsible for keeping copies of certification forms?

Answer: Each club is responsible for retaining, for three years, a certification form for each of its swimmers. There is no requirement that these forms be sent to an LSC or to officials responsible for any competition.

5. Does the certification process impose more liability on coaches?

Answer: No. A coach's liability is already based on the coach's exercise of good professional judgment in deciding whether a swimmer has the skills necessary to safely perform a racing start into less than six feet of water (including racing starts into the USA Swimming minimum starting depth of four feet). Certification simply documents that for each swimmer, such professional judgment was exercised. Similarly, coaches are also already responsible for following the progression set forth in the *American Red Cross Safety Training Manual* to teach racing starts to young or novice swimmers. Certification documents that the steps in the *American Red Cross Safety Training Manual* have been followed.

6. If a certified swimmer is injured while performing a racing start, will the coach be covered by USSIC insurance?

Answer: Yes, if the injury occurs in practice, at a sanctioned or approved competition, or at a closed competition. Competitions that are not an approved, sanctioned, or closed competition under the provisions of USA Swimming's Rules and Regulations have never been covered by USSIC. A coach who fails to follow the certification process will not be insured by USSIC in the event of injury.

7. Does the certification make a coach liable when a swimmer is injured performing a racing start at times other than under the coach's supervision?

Answer: No. To address the fact that swimmers may practice or compete outside the supervision of their coach, USA Swimming has prepared a Safety Notice to Parents, for posting at all member clubs. That Notice makes clear that it is the parents' responsibility to make sure that no child who has not been certified attempts to perform a racing start into less than six feet of water.

8. Are LSCs or meet officials responsible for checking that each swimmer participating in a competition has been safety certified?

Answer: No. It is the responsibility of the coach who is supervising his or her swimmers at a competition to use reasonable care to make sure that only swimmers who have been certified perform racing starts into less than six feet of water. It is the responsibility of the parents in circumstances where the coach is not supervising the swimmers.

9. Can swimmers who have not been certified still participate in swim meets?

Answer: Yes. However, they may not start from either a starting block or from the side of the pool and may start only from within the pool.

10. Where can I find information about teaching head first entry progressions and racing start safety?

Answer: The progressions are described with accompanying photos in the *American Red Cross Safety Training for Swim Coaches Manual*. Access the Manual on the coach's tab at <http://www.usaswimming.org>.