

Relay Judging Platforms: Reflections on the First Year of Use

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INTRODUCTION

As a long-time high school swimming official and as a director of the facility where our local high school trains and competes, I have spent many years hosting swim meets where I chose to not serve as a meet official in order to avoid the perception that any type of conflict of interest exists. Unfortunately, due to professional relocation and/or retirement of many colleagues over the past few years, I have been pressed into service in the capacity of meet official.

The biggest concern I have always had when officiating are making judgments on very close relay exchanges between swimmers, especially when the final 400 freestyle relay determines the outcome of a meet. If a close call is made which benefits the local high school, the opposing school could scream "Homer!" if they do not agree with the decision. On the other hand, if a call on a relay exchange goes against the local high school, a potential irate parent (or multiple parents) might have a different interpretation. Additionally, with my son heading into his high school years, I have always been worried that he might have to deal with consequences associated with a relay exchange judgment by his father (me!). The invention and improvement of relay

judging platforms eliminates these fears. More importantly, it transforms the relay exchange, one of the most disputable aspects of officiating, from a human decision to an electronic computation.

When we initiated this change at our university, the majority of those who visited our facility and used this equipment viewed this as a positive step. The majority of swimmers, coaches and parents felt this was a helpful addition in conducting a swim meet. Most importantly, a computer determined if false starts occurred, not a human being, which completely removed the potential for human error associated with judging relay exchanges between swimmers. The purchase and use of relay judging platforms (RJP's) from Colorado Time Systems at our university has been highly successful, but not without some significant time spent in discussion and education with swim meet attendees. This article discusses several issues associated with the use of relay judging platforms, and seeks to answer questions for future first time users or purchasers of the RJP.

SIMILAR TO A TOUCHPAD

Having electronic timing at today's swim meets is as essential to having water, starting blocks and lane lines, but there was a time when this was not the case. Many parents, coaches, and masters swimmers can remember the '60's and '70s, when timing systems were a novelty, and the use of a timing system could actually create controversy. Many of these people can remember disputes where people would insist that "the pads can't be correct" because what people thought they saw with the human eye was less accurate than what the electronic timing system showed. It took a while for many to get used to the idea that what they saw "with their own eyes" might be incorrect and to accept that

electronic timing was the surest, fairest way to determine the results of a race. Today, it is standard procedure to accept the computation of the timing system. The same concept can be applied to the use of RJP's. When the difference between the touch of a swimmer's hand a touchpad and the release of the next swimmer's feet from a starting block is very close (anything within .3 of a second), it is impossible to determine whether a correct decision has been made with the human eye. Just as a touchpad can determine a tie or a difference on a finish to .01 of a second, an RJP can provide a similar degree of accuracy for relay exchanges.

The RJP's are a new, additional component of the overall timing system. A platform rests on top of a

starting block which is connected into the same cable as the finishing touchpad. The touchpad registers the finishing swimmer's

The touchpad registers the finishing swimmer's touch at the end of the swimming course, while the relay platform registers the release of pressure when the swimmer's feet leave the starting block platform.

touch at the end of the swimming course, while the relay platform registers the release of pressure when the swimmer's feet leave the starting block platform. If the swimmer in the water touches the pad .01 of a second or more after the release of the next swimmer's foot, a disqualification will result. If the foot of the swimmer on the block releases from the RJP at the exact same instant as the swimmer in the water touches the touchpad (.00 of a second difference) or later, no disqualification will occur. It is the job of the timing system to pick out the differential between the release of the foot vs. the touch of the hand within .01 of a second.

FAIRNESS

Having used RJP's for a year now, I have discovered that one of the major concerns coaches wrestle with is the concept of fairness. When they are first exposed to RJP's, quite often I hear them say, "I don't want my swimmers to get cheated; I want it to be fair." This is the major objective in purchasing and using the RJP's: to avoid mistakes on calls between relay exchanges! When the call on a relay exchange is computerized, accuracy is increased, making the process fairer to everyone than when human judgment completes the task. Now of course, as with electronic timing systems, an individual must monitor the system throughout the duration of a race to make sure that system is working properly. What happens if there is a touchpad or timing system malfunction? Go to the backup timing system. The same idea applies to the use of RJP's. If there is an obvious malfunction of the RJP's, the officials who are monitoring the race can override the electronic platforms if it becomes necessary.

Another concern coaches have regarding fairness centers on the actual ability of the RJP's to do their job. Quite often I hear comments that "those things don't work properly." This issue has been addressed to Colorado Time Systems (CTS) staff, who assured me that RJP's have been through extensive testing for many years. Simply stated, if the RJP's didn't work properly, CTS would not put them out on the market. The whole concept of "fairness" at a meet is actually enhanced through the use of relay judging platforms.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Having run many meets over the past year with many different teams who were first time users of this equipment, there are a few ways to make the implementation of the process easier. First and foremost is advance communication with those attending an upcoming competition. Whether it is by e-mail, phone conversation or dissemination of documents associated with meet

information, letting people know in advance that this equipment will be used and addressing any concerns is a must. Along with addressing concerns, educating people regarding common misconceptions is vital. From there, it is the job of the coaches to educate their swimmers and alleviate any fears the athletes may have. The concept and message to be delivered to swimmers can be simplified by the following five statements:

- If you go early, you'll be disqualified.
- If you don't go early, you won't be disqualified.
- Nobody gets away with anything.
- Nobody gets cheated with incorrect calls.
- The same four rules will apply to all teams at the meet.

With regard to the transition to RJP use a collective effort of communication and training on the part of meet managers, officials and coaches will lead to proper implementation.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

As with anything new in our society, we need to keep an open mind with regard to change and improvement. With regard to hosting, running, and participation in a swimming competition, the same thoughts hold true. Just as widespread use of timing systems has alleviated the biggest controversy associated with swimming meets (the order of finish of swimmers at the end of a close race), the acceptance and use of relay judging equipment will help improve fairness for athletes and coaches, computerizing an element of a swim meet competition that was previously subject to human judgment. When swimmers, coaches and parents walk into today's facilities, if electronic timing is not a part of the equation, eyebrows are raised and many are likely to comment, "What, no timing system?" Having an electronic timing system is an essential part of equipment for swimming meet operation, and RJP's are now a standard piece of equipment at national and international meets. It is time to have RJP's viewed the same way universally.
