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The Art of Being a Starter

By Laurie Gunn, Southeast Region News Coordinator

At the beginning of every race is a common denominator, the starter.

Meet USATF Georgia Association member **Jacqui Collins**. Collins has been around the track as a USATF Certified Official since 2003. For 18 of those years, she has been a starter.



Jacqui learned there was a shortage of officials when attending track meets with her daughter. She acted on her interest in becoming an official and desire to support and to help make a difference in USATF Youth programs. In addition to being a starter, the National Level Certified Official works shot put, discus, hammer, and she umpires when needed. She also serves as Officials Coordinator for Clemson University and meets throughout Georgia. But her first love is being a starter.

“I was mentored by **Art Carrington**. He was an outstanding, focused and detail-oriented mentor,” said Collins. “He kept me by his side for over two years before allowing me to be a starter on my own.”

Collins will be the first to tell you the time and tutelage she was mentored was the best thing that has happened in her officiating career. “I did not have to perform ‘on the job’ training once I began working meets as the only starter. I was prepared.”

The retired IBM IT Trainer uses her 36 years of experience to mentor starters with the same practices taught to her. “A mentor should provide negative and positive feedback,” she said. “My mentees have had successful careers as starters. All continue to grow and use their own best practices.”

Best practices include being prepared. “As a starter, you should never assume the venue will have the tools and equipment you will need,” said the Washington, D.C. native. “When I am selected to start a meet, I first complete my checklist of needed equipment and load up my wagon. Outdoor meets require more equipment than indoor meets.”

Checklist:

- Starter Pistols - always have a back-up.
- Speaker system to ensure runners can hear the race commands .

- Lap cards for distance events.
- Extra hip numbers in case athletes need them at the starting line.
- Safety pins, rubber bands, and tape.
- Small ladder for larger events to ensure all competitors can hear the starter and the starter can see each competitor at the start line.
- Ensure that you have clean starter pistols and ammunition to complete the event.
- Make contact with the Meet Director.
- Check the weather before arriving at the venue (outdoor season).
- Walk the track to check for markings and to clear any debris.
- Meet with the timing crew to discuss the desired interaction between timer and starter.

For Collins, direct communication between the starter and timing crew secures a smooth meet. "That is a must for success."

Another key to success for Jacqui is staying on top of her game. "I set up regular meetings with starters in my area to come together to discuss recent experiences," she said. "We also review equipment and new tools that will make the role of the starter better for the athletes."

The Morgan State University alumna became a track and field timer to amplify her skills as a starter. "A starter who understands the role of the timer will become a quality starter," she said.

Collins prefers youth meets. "Youth meets teach a starter more than they will ever learn firing the gun at the higher levels. The challenges of 12 or more age divisions and rules for youth require a great deal of patience and a sense of humor," she said.

Some of her favorite meets include the Junior Olympic and the Para Olympics. Meets to work on Jacqui's wish list are the Olympics and the Penn Relays.

When asked what words of wisdom she shares with officials interested in becoming a starter she said, "Be knowledgeable of the financial and time commitment. Also, a good starter is an individual who has a passion for track and field and is detail oriented. A great starter is one who is always being a student of the sport".

As for the 2025 season, Collins said, "I plan to continue to build on my best practices for being a quality starter and a prolific meet influencer."