Time Trials Referee

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Most people associate time trials with a session between prelims and finals during a meet. The glossary in the USA Swimming Rulebook defines time trials as “an event conducted within or independently of a meet where the swimmer races against the clock to establish an official time.” I’ve worked on time trials that are part of a meet (one or two sessions), organized and planned as a part of a larger meet (such as Sectionals or Futures), or sanctioned as potential sessions during a larger meet. A common denominator is that the time trials are ad hoc – with entries, seeding, and session planning conducted immediately before or during the session. As with any swim meet, there are two key elements that the referee needs to keep in mind to ensure a successful event for the swimmers: preparation and communication.

One of my goals is to provide a high-quality experience for the athletes that enables them to perform at their best. There are many methods to address these elements. This is an overview of how I work for success and some of the tools I use. There are some lessons I’ve learned that I believe help ensure success. Before proceeding through the discussion, one qualifier is that you must have a process and set of tools that work for you in the environment in which you are working. I will refer to some of my tools and have provided a link at the end of this document where I’ve saved a template spreadsheet and an example meet program. One note – I continually adapt my spreadsheets to work for each meet – they aren’t necessarily developed for general use (*I will refer to the spreadsheet tabs in italics*). You could use a pencil and paper if it’s a small meet – I do recommend a ruler for neatness!

So, you’ve been assigned as the time trial referee – now what? Let’s examine the phases of the meet, with a particular focus on preparation and communication. Most of this document focuses on preparation, as I believe it is the key to success.

BEFORE THE MEET

The first thing I do is read and dissect the meet announcement for the time trial to understand the boundaries and any limitations of the meet. These include:

- The timing system being used
- The events offered
- The order of events
- Which athletes are eligible for entry
- The number of swims available to each athlete per session and meet
- How entries are received
- Any fees

Along with the meet announcement, I discuss the host's and governing body's restrictions on the time trial with them. This includes the events being offered at time trials and their order. Typically, the events are restricted to those provided in the main meet, with a preference for events offered on the day, followed by those provided the next day, and then wrapping around to those offered on days prior. For Long Course Meter meets, the 50s are typically offered at the beginning or the end of the time trial session if starts are from the other end. Long Distance freestyle events may be restricted to one or two days to ensure an adequate break between sessions., The meet announcement and discussions will give you an idea of what you are trying to accomplish.

I have a standard set of questions for the meet host around the following topics (*I set up a "questions" tab in my spreadsheet*):

- Is the host assisting?
- What tools are available (computer, printer, sign-up forms, power)?
- Does the host already have a process (I have found it is easier to adapt my process to the host's process if there is one that works for them)?
- What is the Meet Manager setup and operation – is the time trial Meet Manager networked or standalone?
- How many pools and lanes are available?
- When will signups be taken?
- How are payments made?
- Do they have metrics for session programs (i.e., how many do they print, where do they print them, how are they distributed)?

I then set up the events for my spreadsheet. The meet host may already have done this for you. Typically, if the time trial is associated with another meet, the time trial events are limited to those included in the main meet (there are exceptions). Prepare the order of events for each day of the time trial if it's multi-day. If I can, I use the event numbers from the main meet as the basis for the time trial ("*event numbers" tab in my spreadsheet*) – incrementing by 100 for each day. This makes it easier for me to develop session timelines as the days progress. Plan how you will create the order of events for the session – I use the spreadsheet, but you can use Meet Manager to build by event and then rearrange for the session. I create the timeline from my spreadsheet using default values for race times *(I use the next lower level of qualifying times for the events "setup" tab in the spreadsheet*). I believe having an accurate timeline is essential to assist coaches and athletes with their preparation for the race. I will also coordinate with the host any posters and instructions for the coaches and athletes signing up for the time trial – including when particular events may be held, the timing of entries, etc. (*see the "TT events and numbering" tab in the spreadsheet for an example*).

One word of advice on staffing the time trial sessions: use officials or meet host volunteers for timers if possible – that reduces the heat interval and any confusion on deck. I have a standard officials' assignment template ("*officials positions" and "responsibilities" tabs in the spreadsheet*) that I modify based on the number of officials available for the session. This allows me to pre-plan assignments, notify officials, and provide them with information about running the session before we get on deck. I work with the Team Lead Chief Judge before the meet on assignment sheets so they are as complete as possible, and can be distributed promptly to the assigned officials.

One of the last things I prepare before arriving at the meet is a template for statistics about the time trial ("*stats" tab in the spreadsheet*). A readily available source is the Meet Summary report within Meet Manager. I also use my spreadsheet to capture other information, such as the most popular event. I do this to provide a record for the future and keep people informed about what we have accomplished.

AT THE MEET

When I arrive at the facility, I first meet with the host and any volunteers to introduce myself and review the equipment, locations, and processes (including having at least two sets of eyes to review printouts before publishing). I like to test the equipment (primarily printers) at the beginning of each day to allow time to resolve any issues. Make sure you are familiar with the layout of the time trial management area and ensure there's adequate space to take entries.

I want to meet with officials before the first session to review the time trial setup and timing quickly and to provide an overview of responsibilities and expectations. I also get together with the

assigned team for the time trial at the beginning of the day to review protocols and expectations. If possible, I arrange for mentors for junior officials to help with their growth and experience.

Be prepared for a rush at signups when the designated time arrives for entries to be taken, typically towards the end of the signup period. As entries are taken, I suggest the following:

- Verbally verify eligibility
- Ensure the athlete and/or coach understands the timing and protocols (e.g., flyover starts) of the time trial session (a good poster helps)
- Check each entry (entry time, event number, stroke, distance name, team)
- If taking entries for future dates, verify that the date is correct
- Enter the entry details into the Meet Manager file under the athlete's name (I enter into my timeline spreadsheet at the same time to start building the timeline) and check for exceptions
- Start looking for opportunities to combine events
- Verify entries using a psych sheet and the session entry cards to ensure you have accounted for every entry correctly

As the close time approaches, look for opportunities to combine events and adjust the order of events within the session. I look at the following when combining events:

- Same distance and similar time to complete if possible
- Try to restrict a side to the same type of stroke observation for the stroke judge observing those lines
- If combining forward starts and backstroke events, place the backstroke lanes nearest to the Starter, and make sure the forward start swimmers know that there will be two long whistles for their event
- If combining distances (e.g., 800 M Freestyle with 1500 M Freestyle), make sure the timing table, timers, and swimmers all know what's going on.
- Don't set up a combined heat that's too confusing – you will probably waste more time sorting it out than you will save.

Seed the events and then adjust the heats for lane assignments if combining events. Print the heat sheets and verify the event order, lane assignments, and other details. I have found that double-column heat sheets work best for clarity – especially if you have a few combinations of events (*see the example "time trial program" for the meet referee*). I use my printer and a PDF editor, but you can achieve the same result with a Sharpie and a ruler. Some items I include in the heat sheet:

- Boxes around combined events
- Each heat is numbered, starting with number 1 (which may include multiple events)
- I write within the heat any event number it is combined with
- Any special instructions (e.g., flyover starts)
- Any special notes

Similarly, for the session report, I put a box around combined events and allow time before the start of the session for officials to be in position and for any swim-offs to be completed.

Ensure the timing table is set up correctly and officials are in position before the time trial session begins. If you have communicated sufficiently before the session starts, you should be able to monitor the session and delegate responsibility. However, be prepared for last-minute adjustments to accommodate requests from the meet referee or host. After the last event, make sure you thank your officials and gather up the documentation for the meet host, ensure equipment (watches, radios, clipboards, etc.) is returned to where it is supposed to be, and then

gather and update your statistics. I like to give a brief report to the officials at the following officials' meeting, if possible, as well as at the end of the meet. I also provide a meet report to the host and sanctioning body.

This is a brief overview of my process. Remember, we aim to provide the highest-quality experience for our athletes. Since time trials are more ad hoc than regular meets, preparation is a key to success. Ensure that you clearly communicate your plans, session program, and results to all stakeholders.

The files referred to in this document are located here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/18rkHRrG4Rpq6LS4-5E7YY0gu0iKd21mj?usp=sharing