

## Start Strategy

By Susan Ellis

Each position on the starting line has advantages and disadvantages. The strategy you use from each starting position can help in determining the outcome of the start, so you need to know how to get the best start you can from each position.

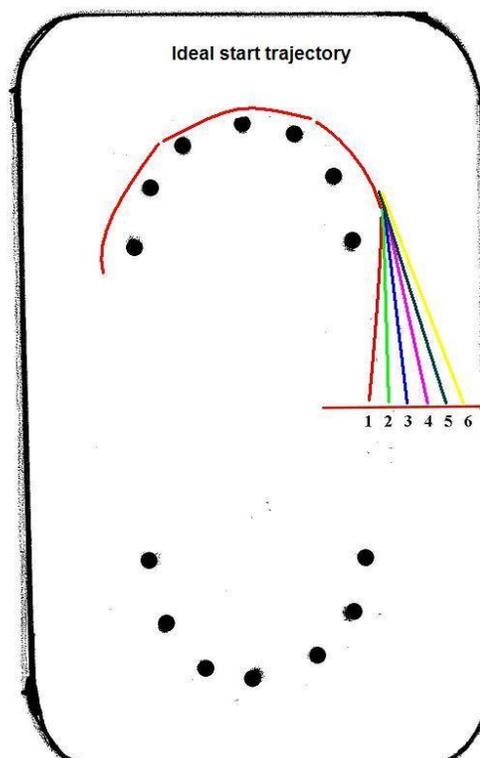


Photo by Jerry Search

Some consider position 1 (the closest to the inside of the track) a great advantage because you have the shortest trajectory (path) to the first block. Some consider it a disadvantage because you can get cut off and trapped at the first block if one of the other positions beats you there. The outside position may be a disadvantage in that it's the furthest trajectory from the first block, but it is also an advantage in that you don't get trapped behind or in between people, and you have a greater choice of options on entry into the turn if one of the other positions beats you there. You need to be able to turn each position into your own psychological advantage, be confident in your strategy in each position, knowing how to turn disadvantage into advantage. Of course, the faster your start is, the easier gaining the advantage will be, so work on perfecting your start speed.

The start rules say that each skater must follow a straight line in to the first block and not interfere with another skater's line. While this is true, it doesn't mean that a skater starting in position 1 needs to stay in a straight line with the first block if they are clearly ahead of position 2, or the position 6 needs to stay out to the boards until the first block if they are clearly ahead of position 5. If the opening is there, take it right away. Winning the first couple of steps off the line means you get to choose your trajectory. Don't hesitate and don't back off. You need to be aggressive on the start, with reason of course, to take your best trajectory. If you don't, someone else will!

So, let's look at the ideal start trajectories. These trajectories presume you have beaten your competitors off the line. As mentioned, position 1 (P1) is the closest distance to the first block so that would might be an advantage – as long as you get there first. But even if you get there first, unless you widen out your trajectory a bit you are jammed up on the transition to the corner and can't get as much lean off the right skate. Instead



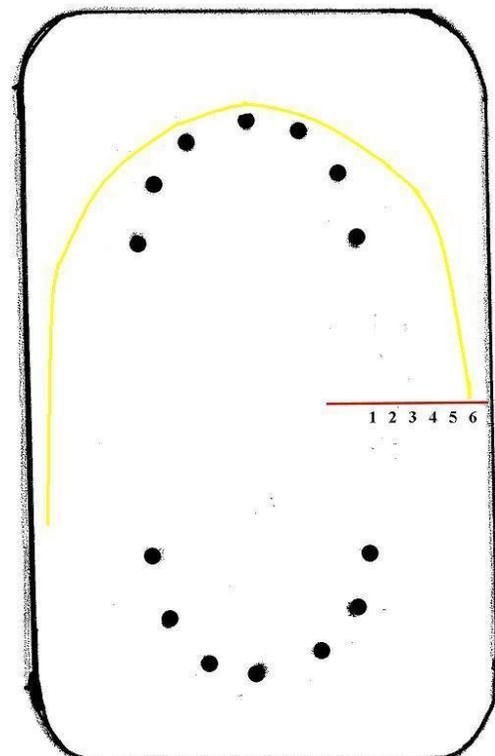
of going in a straight line right towards the first block, head about 2-3 feet away from the first block. This not only allows you more lean room off your right, but also allows you to go a bit deeper down the track before starting your transition (lay in). Ideally your lay in for P1 should happen after the first block so that your left skate comes down at the second block or later.

For position 2 (P2) your goal is pretty much the same as position 1. Unless you have to block up P1 from getting to the block first, stay off the first block by 2-3 feet to give yourself room to lay in. Again, because you are closer to the blocks on the entry you will be starting the transition later and deeper than the outside positions. If you start the transition too early, you will be crossing over without the lean, and that's not really efficient. For positions 1 and 2 you will normally take one less crossover in the entry than the outside positions. It's the same principle as taking one crossover to the apex block when skating a normal narrow entry track. As you are closer to the blocks there is less distance to cover to the apex blocks, therefore less crossovers, and starting deep down the track.

Position 3 is ideal in that you can set up a bit wider in the transition than the two inside positions, start the transition slightly earlier, and develop more lean on the lay in. Providing you have room to lean that is. If P2 is still right beside you, you may not have the room to lean and might want to stay a little deeper, waiting until 2 has started their transition before starting yours. The gain you will get in speed from the lean is well worth the fraction of a second wait as the acceleration from lean on the entry will help you gain speed to on the exit.

Another option is to try to get across on P1 and P2 as quickly as possible to block up their access to the first block. Here's where you have to be really careful not to interfere with them as you come in on the track. But if you can get your skate ahead of their skate on the first couple of steps it gives you the psychological edge to say you are in the lead and have the lead control to come to the block first. Just be very careful it is still a straight line from P3 to the block and not a zig zag across in to P2.

Although positions 4, 5, and 6 are further away from the first block they are actually the position from which you can generate the most speed on the entry, thus generating more speed on the exit. So even if you are behind at the first block, your extra speed gives you more options to pass on the exit or even down the first straight. The outside positions allow you to start your transition a little wider and a little earlier allowing you to take an extra crossover in to the apex block. Just make



sure to lean on the lay in so the set down of the left is well leaned, just like a normal lay in on a two cross corner. A common mistake by the outside positions is to stay out too long, often not coming in towards the track until after the second block. As the pack goes in towards the blocks you immediately lose ground by staying out so long. You want to come in enough to not waste space, but still allow for 2-3 hard, leaned crossovers.

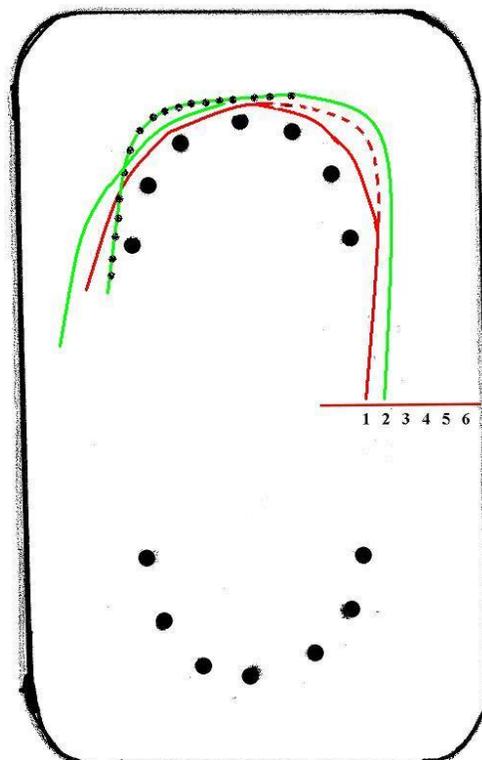
These positions also give you the option to come in on the inside positions if you are a step ahead of them to block their path. Again be careful not to cross track as you come across. Although it's rarely called at the start, it does happen.

### Moves and counter moves

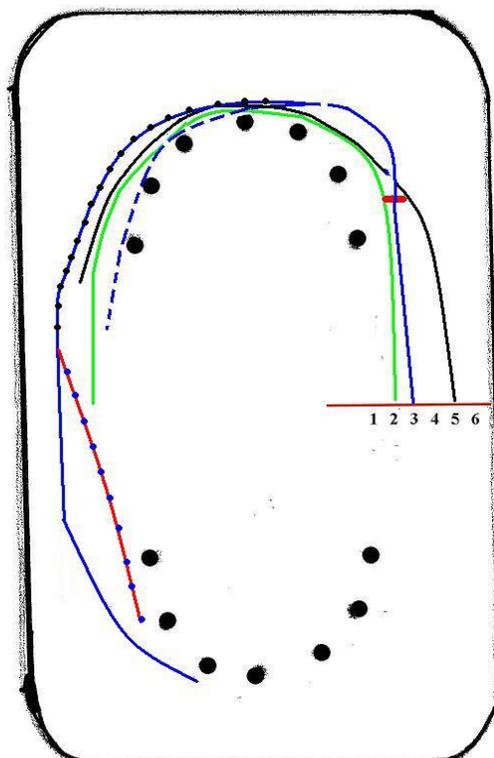
The really fun part about short track is its unpredictability. You might not be the fastest person out there but still be able to win on tactics. Strategy and tactics are just as important on the start as they are in the rest of the race.

This diagram illustrates a tactic by P1 and a couple of options open to P2 to counter the tactic.

The solid red line is the ideal path for P1 to follow. However, P2 is even with P1 still at the 1<sup>st</sup> block. P1 decides to do a maneuver called 'deep tracking' on P2 (dashed red line). P1 goes deeper down in to the track, staying off the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> blocks before laying in. The unpredictability is that P2 can't time their lay in until P1 has gone in so when P1 lays in hard he opens an immediate gap on P2. Although P2 has no chance to counter the deep track there are still two options to try to get ahead before the next corner. One is to come away from the blocks just after apex to change their trajectory out of the corner and then come up the inside of P1 (dotted green line out). The sudden change in trajectory as you change to head more up the straight results in a bit of a slingshot effect and an increase in speed. Of course this won't work too well if P1 has decided to hold a tight line on the last block. You also have to be careful not to allow other skaters to pass inside as you widen out after apex. The other option is to stay wide on the exit, get an extra cross over in, come up on the outside of P1 on the straight and be ahead by first block. This works well especially if P1 is concentrating on guarding the last block. Because of their narrower trajectory out they might not be able to get an extra crossover and, therefore, might come out with less speed.



In this diagram P3 (blue) has been beaten to the 2<sup>nd</sup> block by P1 and P5 and is now jammed up in between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> block. P1 is doing a late transition at 2<sup>nd</sup> block and P5 has come in on him killing his speed. He can either slow up and wait for them to go by and then follow the same path in, but that would likely still leave him behind on the exit. Or he can go deeper in to the corner, step out slightly on the right skate to allow for more of a whip effect on the lay in to get speed, and try to come up the inside on the exit (blue dash), or stay wide on the exit to get the extra cross in and come up the outside on the straight (blue dot). If he is clearly ahead on the exit he should come in a line that brings him back in towards the next corner as early as possible to prevent a retake on the straight (red line). If he is not clearly ahead he should stay wide, take two hard crossovers in to the next turn to set up a pass on the next straight (blue line).



### Picking your spot

In some races, even sprint races, your goal may not be to win the start but to be in 2<sup>nd</sup> place after the first corner. Often skaters will intentionally not start as hard in longer races so they are not in the lead right away. This can back fire big time if the rest of the pack starts hard and you find yourself in last place instead of 2<sup>nd</sup>.

So how do you pick your spot? You should still start fast off the first 3-4 steps to ensure you are ahead of the skaters you want to be ahead of. Then it just takes one easier step, or a slight hesitation, to back off just enough to let one skater by right at the first cross. Be very careful not to back off too much or others will go by. And be prepared to put 100% into the next push to make sure you don't lose ground.

### Taking your space on the line

With 4-6, and sometimes even more skaters on the line when there are advancements, the line gets very crowded. Although there are dots to indicate where the skaters should place themselves on the line, these are sometimes ignored by skaters, and not enforced by starters. To ensure you have enough room on the line, it's a good idea to keep your arm extended towards the next skater to keep them arm's length apart. Don't push them if they come in to your space but be firm in guarding your space. If it is someone who persists in coming in to your space, raise your hand as you come to the line and indicate to the starter that the person has come too close. They may or may not do anything about it so be prepared to go down in to position and start the race anyway.

### **Psychology of the start**

Starting in short track is definitely not about being passive. To win a start you must own the first block the minute you step to the line. It belongs to you and no one else. You must start hard, and start aggressively (again, within reason). If you are in the habit of backing down, your competitors will know that and come across on you every time. You need to block them out of your mind, see only the first block, and get there. So maybe your blades get hit a few times. Most of the time it won't damage them, and if it does, they are repairable or replaceable. Lost races are NOT replaceable.

Although you need to start aggressively, you still need to come to the line calm and relaxed to allow your muscles to do what they need to do to get you out there as fast as possible. Fear or anxiety will only cause tension and freeze up muscles. Learn and practice a tension release method that you can bring to the line and instantly calm and focus yourself. Many of us carry tension in our facial muscles so learning to relax the face can help relax the rest of the body. One Olympic athlete I have worked with would relax first, then imagine the start going downhill as he went in to position so all he had to do was fall down the hill.

Even if you are on the line with the fastest starter in the world you still need to put forth your best start to be in a position to pass later in the race. Technique, repetition, relaxation, focus, imagery, practicing different start strategy and tactics from all the different positions on the line are all tools you can use to keep improving your start all the time.

For more on the start set up position see [Start Position – March 2004](#)

For more on start technique see [Start Technique – October 2008](#)

For more on developing powerful starts see [Specific Strength, Power, Endurance – Part 4 – Starts – August 2006](#)