



Teaching Starts Using Backstroke Ledges

Beginning with the start of the 2025-26 school year, state high school associations may permit the use of backstroke ledges during swimming competitions. Associations that adopt the use of backstroke starting ledges in competition must clearly articulate the importance of a teaching protocol implementation for their high school competitors to minimize risk. The utilization of backstroke ledges requires clear, structured education protocols, which are outlined below. Adequate training time must be provided to minimize risk and ensure performance readiness. By following these guidelines and maintaining a clear focus on skill progression, safety, and controlled environment practices, the use of backstroke ledges can be safely integrated into swimming competitions and training sessions.

WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS OF THE NEW RULE?

Each State Association must first adopt the use of the ledges via an appropriate policy. Without that adoption, ledges shall not be used in that state. The rule spells out the dimensions for the starting ledges which are to be identical for all lanes. Minimum water depth of six feet at the starting wall, for a distance of 5 meters from that wall, is required for all lanes. Use of the ledge is optional for each swimmer, and each swimmer is responsible for setting the ledge in place prior to the start of the race.

WHAT CONSTITUTES “STATE ASSOCIATION ADOPTION”?

Before ledges are used in high school competition, the State Association must formally declare that usage is permitted. In addition, the State Association may wish to include any requirements to impose on that usage. Such requirements could include topics such as proper training for athletes, coaches and officials and monitoring thereof; expectations regarding the installation and removal of the ledges in the medley relay and backstroke events; additional specifications for the equipment and dealing with malfunctions and other negative effects upon equitable competition.

WHAT TRAINING SHOULD ATHLETES RECEIVE PRIOR TO USING THE LEDGE?

A sample curriculum to assist coaches is provided on the Swimming and Diving page of the NFHS.org website. State Associations may wish to stipulate their expectations of the components of proper training prior to the use during competition and may also want to limit use of ledges to certain groups of athletes. Research studies involving use of ledges make it clear that training is essential to safe use of this equipment. Monitoring of athlete training prior to the use of ledges in training sessions and eventually in competition will also need to be addressed to assure athlete safety.

WHAT COACHING QUALIFICATIONS ARE NEEDED?

State Associations will need to provide guidance in this area, as generic training for coaching backstroke starts does not necessarily include using the backstroke ledges safely and effectively. Monitoring of coaches' preparation for overseeing ALL aspects of high school swimming and diving is an essential task of the State Association.

WHAT TRAINING SHOULD OFFICIALS RECEIVE?

The new rule imposes no new duties on meet officials, though State Associations may wish to utilize officials in a variety of ways that facilitate implementation of the state's policy. State Associations must clearly communicate expectations of officials in their role regarding backstroke ledges. The main attribute required of officials with respect to this new equipment is PATIENCE. It is very likely that an additional 1-5 minutes per heat will be added to the duration of the meet, as swimmers learn how to install the devices prior to their races. Officials are not responsible for the use of the ledges or how to teach their use. If a swimmer does not know how to use the ledge it may indicate a lack of education, and the official should direct swimmer back to their coach.

WHAT TYPES OF DEVICES MAY BE USED?

There are a number of backstroke ledges available commercially across a wide price range. State Associations may determine which of those they wish to approve and may place appropriate limitations on which devices are acceptable, provided the specifications of the rule are met.

MAY "HOMEMADE" LEDGES BE USED?

The rule provides multiple specifications for this equipment which presumably can be met by other than manufactured devices. However, monitoring of proper construction and compliance with rule specifications, including the proper mounting of the device, is most appropriately a concern of the local governing entity.

MAY A SWIMMER USE HIS OR HER OWN DEVICE?

The rule expectation is that ledges used in competition are identical for all lanes. While it is conceivable that a swimmer's own device might match what is provided by the meet host, it would be unlikely and thus swimmers should probably be restricted, by State Association policy, from using personal equipment.

HOW IS THE LEDGE TO BE INSTALLED?

By rule, the swimmer is responsible for properly placing the ledge for use prior to the start of the heat in the medley relay and 100 backstroke events. Use of the ledge is optional for each backstroke swimmer.

WHAT CONSEQUENCES FOR NON-REMOVAL OF DEVICE IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE START?

Ideally, ledges will be removed immediately following the start of each heat of the 200-yard medley relay and 100-yard backstroke events. How and by whom this is accomplished is a matter for local determination via State Association policy. Keep in mind that backstroke swimmers finishing their leg of the relay and the swimmer turning at 50-yards in the 100-yard backstroke event may encounter difficulties if the ledge remains in the water; also, interference with accurate electronic timing may occur. Any adjustments in competition results or sanctions for not removing the ledges will need to be established by the State Association policy. Swimmers may designate a team member, a timer or a coach to remove the ledge in that event.

Consideration of penalties:

- a. Teammate not being able to remove the ledge in a timely manner - [The host school should communicate with the visiting coach on how to remove the ledges after the start.](#)
- b. Teammate falling into the water trying to remove the ledge - [Similar to when the 500 free](#)

lap counter falls into the pool and should be handled in the same manner.

- c. When does a re-swim occur if it is to be awarded - Follow the guidelines of a swim-off, for adequate rest. If the swimmer and coach agree that adequate rest has been provided, the swim may occur sooner than 25 minutes.
- d. How can turn judges and take off judges manage the circumstances as the ledges are removed during the medley relay in the limited space - Keep all subsequent relay swimmers behind the timers at the start of the backstroke. One of the other swimmers in the relay could be designated to approach the starting end to remove the ledge. Keep all other swimmers back and non-participants out of the starting area.

HOW SHOULD A LEDGE MALFUNCTION BE TREATED?

Different types of malfunctions may occur. For example, if the mounting straps somehow separate from the footboard, this would be something an athlete could not be expected to control, and any response should protect the athlete. If the athlete improperly installs the ledge prior to her/his race, and the device fails as a result, a different response may become appropriate. Remember, backstroke ledge malfunctions are similar to a starting block malfunction. For example, a re-swim can be considered which is similar to a swim-off.

Malfunction of backstroke ledges:

- a. Is the entire heat stopped or only the lane with the malfunction? There are a multitude of scenarios related to the malfunction of the ledge which are combined with the type of meet that is being held. A point of clarification, the official must investigate to confirm that it is indeed an equipment malfunction not simply a poor start.
- b. In either case in the above when would a re-swim occur (if a single lane - does the competitor swim alone) Subject to a confirmed malfunction of the backstroke ledge, the official should ask the swimmer if the malfunction affected their swim. If the swimmer feels the malfunction affected their swim then the swimmer can be offered a re-swim. The official should clearly state that the re-swim would negate the first swim and the time on the re-swim will be the official time.
- c. **Dual meet with a properly functioning timing system:** The swimmer may be offered a solo swim.
Invitational: If the malfunction can be fixed the swimmer should be placed in a subsequent heat and all swimmers utilizing ledges according to the rule. If the ledge cannot be fixed or a replacement is not available then the swimmers who achieved a time using the ledges must re-swim and the new time be used for placing or advancement.
Prelims and Finals: For prelims, utilize a re-swim as in an invitational. For finals, all swimmers should re-swim and everything that occurred in the original heat is negated except for a sportsmanship violation.

USE OF BACKSTROKE LEDGES DURING WARM-UP

Similar to NFHS Suggested Meet Warm-up Procedures for forward starts, specify 2 lanes as one-way sprint lanes with racing starts permitted at the starting end of the pool. Place a cone marker or similar sign on the starting platforms in lanes not specified as one-way sprint lanes. Swimmers should not be allowed on a starting platform when a backstroke swimmer is executing a start in the same sprint lane.