Launch Driving

Instructions for driving chase boats in regattas at Oak Ridge venue
Introduction

- Referees have a secret: They know that they have the best seats in the house for watching a regatta. As a launch driver, you’ll share this “perk” and see everything that happens on the water. We think you'll have fun doing it.
- Referees have two primary duties during a regatta: safety always comes first; fairness to race participants is a close second.
- Along the way, referees play numerous roles including traffic cop, safety officer, judge, repairman, timer, coach, and advisor to the media. Your job, as a launch driver, is to drive the boat so that the referee can fulfill all of his or her responsibilities.
- The routine is simple: There will be eight to twelve launches, each with a driver, referee, and perhaps a timer or observer (referee candidate) aboard.
- The launches will usually work in pairs, with each pair following every second or third race from start to finish. The launch then returns to the starting line to await its next race. Other rotations are possible.
- After launching with your referee ask what their hand signals are. The referees are mostly systematic, meaning the signals they use are universal. But, a few may have slightly different signals.
- Thank you. Thank you for volunteering for one of the positions requiring a great deal of responsibility.

Clothing

- Be prepared for any weather. It may be cool in the morning, warm and sunny at noon, and rainy in the afternoon. The regatta will go on in any conditions except heavy fog or severe weather conditions such as lightning or high wind.
- Bring sunscreen. Use it.
- Bring rain gear if there is any chance of rain. The last problem a referee wants to handle is a launch driver that is in danger of hypothermia.
- Don’t wear red or white. Referees use red flags to stop races and white flags to steer crews if necessary. A crew could mistake a hat, shirt, or jacket for an official’s flag even for a distracting few moments.

Going to the Start

- It is important that we create as little wake as possible while heading to the start, but we have to be there in time for our next race in the rotation. We try to minimize wakes on the course both for races that are racing down the course as well for the crews going to the start outside the course. Always scan the waters around you for potential victims of your wake.
How we progress up the course to the start depends on two factors: time between races ("centers") and the number of referees on the course. In general we will have enough referees on the water that we need to move roughly 500 meters between races. So, heading up the course we would expect races to pass us at the 1500m, 1000m, and 500m marks. Two methods are described below, but the referee will inform you of which method they want you to use.

The best option is puttering up the lake off the course (one launch in lane 0 and one outside lane 6). This produces a low-wake or no-wake at a low speed. We go to neutral as a race passes.

Sometimes, the centers are such that the launches need to move faster between races. Creating wake along one shore or the other is not desirable, so one goes up the course in the center of the course (lane 3 or 4) at high speed. This sends out as small a wake as possible. (see picture below)
• If a race approaches you as you head back up the course, stop! Let your wake hit your transom from behind. Then--and only then--make a 90 degree turn at no-wake speed and get well off the course and wait for the race to pass. Your referee will indicate to which side of the course you should go. When the last shell has passed, return to the center of the course and continue up the course at the highest, but safest, speed possible.

• Limit the direction of travel one of two directions: along the course and perpendicular to the lanes. In general we don’t travel at angles across the course unless told to do so by the referee. When traveling perpendicular to the lanes do so at no-wake speed. Wakes travel a long way and have nothing to stop them if they move up or down the course.

• When not following a race or on the way up to the start line, look out for debris on the course. Pick up all but the smallest pieces. Coxswains can’t judge the danger of the objects they see, and they could needlessly steer around something trivial and reduce their crew’s chance of winning in the process.

• Watch out for crews who need assistance. Referees usually carry a few tools to help with equipment problems. They can also use their radios to call for help or relay a message to the starting line or to the shore. You are an important second set of eyes.

In the Starting Line Area

• Two starting options for chase boats are above the start line (preferred) or just below it. Be sure your launch is not on the actual start line thus interfering with the Aligner’s view and concentration. Preferred locations are shown below.
• If you do not arrive at the starting line in time for the start, boats are aligned, and the starter has initiated the start sequence the referee will likely not want to cross the start line. Do your best to turn perpendicular to the course below the starting line and plan to move across to the desired lane after boats have passed.

![Diagram of starting area]

• Avoid making any wake near the starting line. Smooth water is crucial for good and fair starts. And please don’t chat with crews, cheer for anyone, or make noise in the start area. The athletes need the time and quiet to focus.
• Keep the launch out of the way of the crews. There is heavy traffic in the starting area, and crews should be able to move unimpeded to the starting dock or stake boats for their races. It isn’t easy to steer a 63-foot-long boat, much less turn it around. Two good places to "park" are at the Aligner’s Station, if permitted, or at the end of the starting dock opposite the Aligner.
• Also, try to be conscious of your motor’s fumes if you are idling for a long time next to a crew.

At the Start of a Race
• After the boats have moved away from the dock start to move your launch in behind the race. Take up the position to which your referee has assigned. He or she will tell you which lane they want you to start in: typically in a 6-boat race at Oak Ridge the referees will ask drivers to take launches into the “low” side of 5 or the “high” side of 2. The “low” side of 5 means lane 5 along the 4-5 buoy line. The “high” side of 2 means lane 2 along the 2-3 buoy line.
• Most accidents happen early in the race so it is important to get into a position that allows you to get into the action at once.
• When the Starter moves the red flag and says "Go!", start your stop watch (if your referee has asked you to be his or her backup timer) and pull your boat in quickly behind the crews your referee is watching. To do this, you’ll often head parallel to the starting dock and then make a 90 degree turning into the appropriate lane. Try to do this as gently as possible because your referee will be standing up and it wouldn’t be good form to pitch him or her out of the boat. Remember, however, that most referees are prepared for acceleration and side to side motion in a boat—what they are never prepared for is a sudden slowing of the boat: don’t do it without warning!

**Following the Race**
• Steer straight down the course, staying about 20 meters (two buoys or 66 feet) behind the crews and matching their speed. Follow the referee’s directions for changes in positions (usually done by hand signals) quickly and smartly. It is important to avoid following directly behind a boat with no coxswain since the rower in the stern is steering off a point behind you.
• Normally, the official’s launch always travels tightly along the buoy line. After the first few races, you’ll have it figured out. This is to give crews a clear view of a landmark at the end of the course—“watching their point”.
• Stop for an emergency. Remember that referee launches are on the course primarily to ensure safety. You should rehearse with your ref what to do in an
emergency and where to go. You could have to stop at any time to pick up a rower who has tipped his/her boat over or who has been tossed out of a boat.

- Tell the referee if your wake is about to affect a slow crew behind you. It may be possible to reposition your launch to minimize the effects. Occasionally your referee will knowingly wake a trailing (slow) boat if there is a need to be close to the faster crews. Conversely, he may ask you to “break” the wake of the other ref’s boat by imposing your boat between it and the trailing crew.
- Tell the referee if your launch might impede the visual contact between coxswains. While other considerations may take precedence it is a courtesy to the crews.

At the End of the Race

- Slow down as you approach the finish line and stop before you reach it.
- Keep an eye open for the orange flag in the “up” position in the start tower. When you see the flag go up, mention to the referee that the “Flag is up”. Referees are often watching boats closely and may forget to watch for the flag.
- Stop your stop-watch, if timing the race, on the first downward motion of the large orange finish line flag near the finish line stand. For courtesy, safety, and lack of confusion for the finish line judges, you are not to cross the finish line until the last shell does. This is particularly important at the Oak Ridge venue when we use electronic timing. Expect this, but follow instruction of referee.
- Wait at the finish line area until your referee tells you to leave. He or she has several things to do at the end of the race, so it may take a few minutes. If we have no finish marshal then the referee may have to check weights of coxswains. They need to wait for any potential protests by a boat. After these checks the referee will present a white flag to crews and the tower. They will then report finish time to the tower.
- Again, keep an eye peeled for rowers who are injured and for the next race coming at you down the course.
- Pit Stops: Take breaks as needed for rest rooms, gas, food, whatever. And stay hydrated in warm weather.

Other Notes

- Keep an eye on gas levels. If you are getting low mention it to the referee. We typically have containers of gas on the public dock outside lane 6 around the 1250m mark.
- We typically have porta-potties at the public dock.