

## **Starting a race, including what the flags and hoots mean!**

You can learn about perfect starts from any number of books on racing. The notes below are for those who are just starting racing at FOSSC and want to know how to start, and how to get a 'reasonable' start, rather than a 'fabulous' start. These notes are on the website at [New to Racing – FOSSC](#)

It is all about trying to be on the start line and sailing as fast as possible when the race starts. Theory is easy: reality is more difficult!

The Officer of the Day (OOD) helps you by giving sound signals and raising / lowering flags. However, you need to know what the flags and accompanying sound signals mean.

The "start sequence" (flags and hoots) for racing at FOSSC depends on what type of race is going on – class, handicap or pursuit. Class and Handicap races have similar start sequences so we'll describe them first. (Refer to 'Different Types of Races' <https://www.fossc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/New-to-Racing-Different-types-of-races.pdf> for info on how the different races work at FOSSC.)

### **Handicap Races:**

In a Handicap Race, all the boats start the race at the same time. ('Handicap' refers to the adjustment applied at the end of the race to 'handicap' those classes of boat which are naturally faster than other classes.) The start sequence at FOSSC can be described as "4-2-Go!" Translated, this means there will be a flag raised and hoot at 4 minutes before the race starts; another flag raised and another hoot at 2 minutes before the race starts; and finally a hoot and lowering of both flags at the exact moment the race starts.

So in simple terms, if no flags are flying the start sequence has either not started, or the race has started – hopefully you can work out which! If one flag is flying then the next flag and hoot will indicate 2 minutes before the race starts; and if two flags are flying, the next hoot and lowering of the flags indicate the start of the race.

Surely you want to know what the flags look like!



This is known as the 'Handicap Fleet Flag' and will be raised **4** minutes before a handicap race.



This is known as the 'Preparatory Flag' and will be raised **2** minutes before a handicap race. Both flags will be flying.

Both flags will be lowered when the race starts.

**Class Race:**

In a 'Class Race' at FOSSC each fleet starts separately, at 2 minute intervals. The start sequence is similar to a Handicap Race but there are different starts for 'Handicap', and 'Solo' fleets. (We used to have more fleets, but dwindling numbers of racers have reduced this to just Solos and 'everyone else'.) If you are sailing something other than a Solo, you are in the Handicap fleet.

The Handicap boats starts first, followed by the Solos 2 minutes later. Each class has its own flag which is raised 4 minutes before the class starts the race, and is lowered when that class's race starts. This means there are flags going up and down for 6 minutes at 2 minute intervals!

The class flags are:



Handicap









Solo








Rookie & Junior (some races,  
See next page)

So the normal class racing start sequence looks like this:

Minutes relative to Handicap Start	Flags Raised	Flags Lowered	Sound Signal	Fleet Starting
- 4			One hoot	
- 2	 		One hoot	
0			One hoot	Handicap
+ 4		 	One hoot	Solo

Note that this time the Preparatory flag (blue with white square) goes up 2 minutes before the first start and is lowered as the last fleet starts.









If that all seems confusing to you, another way of looking at it is shown over:

Minutes relative to Handicap Start	Flags Flying	Race Status
Before - 4	None	Nothing
- 4 to - 2		Race not yet started, but racing rules are valid
2 to 0	 	Race not yet started, but racing rules are valid. Handicap fleet is about to start so others please keep away from the start line.*
0 to +2	 	Handicap fleet has started. Solo fleet is about to start.
After + 2	None	Solo fleet has started – all boats are racing!

\* When we say 'keep away from the start line' this is to give those who are about to start the chance to get themselves in the best position they can relative to other starters; boats in classes which are not starting can unintentionally disrupt this, giving advantage to one boat over another. However, it does not mean other boats need to be at the other side of the lake! If you stay about 15m away from either side and either end of the start line then you should be ok.

### **Rookie and Junior Races:**

There are several Junior & Rookie Races which are run alongside class races. The start for these races will be 2 minutes after the Solo start. The start sequence then becomes:

Minutes relative to Handicap Start	Flags Raised	Flags Lowered	Sound Signal	Fleet Starting
- 4			One hoot	
- 2	 		One hoot	
0			One hoot	Handicap
+ 4			One hoot	Solo
+ 6		 	One hoot	Rookie & Junior

### **Pursuit Races:**

In Pursuit races, **each class of boat starts at an allocated time - when its 'start number' disappears.** The numbers are on display in the window of the wet bar under the canopy. The OOD will check which class of boat will start first and will use flags and hoots in a similar vein to a Handicap race start. The Handicap flag is used regardless of which class of boats are sailing. To be honest, pay attention to the numbers more than the flags, but if you want to know the flag sequence:

If Toppers are racing, their start number is 137 (which means 67.5 minutes of racing, as each number on the pursuit box equates to 30 seconds). The start sequence begins 4 minutes prior to the race start, so when the Pursuit Box number 145 ( $137 + (2 \times 4)$ ) disappears, the handicap flag will be raised. When 141 disappears, the Preparatory flag will be raised (2 flags flying). When the Toppers start (when number 137 disappears), the Handicap flag will be lowered. When the last class starts, the Preparatory flag will be lowered.

There will be a sound signal every 30 seconds from when the Handicap flag is raised, to when the last boats start (the sound signal may be switched off if there is a long gap between starts).

So that gives you the flags and hoots, but what else should you know about starting a race? Here are a few hints, tips and pointers to get you going:

- The start line is between the striped pole on the committee boat and the buoy with the striped pole at the other end of the line, usually about 20 metres away. The buoy beside the committee boat (if it is there) has nothing to do with the start line – its sole purpose is to protect the committee boat, i.e. you cannot sail between the inner buoy and the committee boat.
- The start line will usually be at 90 degrees to the wind with you sailing into the wind, i.e. on a tack.
- Start on a Starboard tack – then you will be in the right over boats on port (you can learn about port hand starts when you have more confidence)
- So, if the wind is coming from the north, the start line will be east – west, and you will usually cross it pointing in a north-westerly direction.
- Often, the more experienced sailors will try to start close to the committee boat so aim to start mid-way down the line if you want to keep out of their way and get clean air.
- Alternatively, if you are nervous and want to stay away from other boats, aim to start 1-2 boat lengths behind the better sailors, but not 10 boat lengths behind (if you are too far behind, then you will get in the way of subsequent fleets)
- You need to know what ‘Up, up, up’ means – see the end of these notes
- Top tip - Find a ‘good’ sailor, and follow them from 2 minutes before the start.
- Have a watch counting down time (a waterproof watch with countdown functionality can be bought from somewhere like Argos for around £20). Pay attention to 2 minutes, 1 minute, 30 seconds, 20 seconds, 10 seconds, 9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1,go! If you are in a two-man boat, the crew should watch the countdown and keep telling the helm how long to go before the start. You should be on or very close to the start line at ‘go,’ not 20 metres away!
- If you are getting to the line too quickly, let your sails out to slow down, or if there is room, bear away (but note the ‘up, up, up’ rule)
- If any part of your boat is over the start line when the race starts, you have to make sure that all of your boat returns to the correct side of the line before you can start the race – and you must do this while not getting in the way of any other boat. The OOD will probably tell you if you are over the start line early, but the responsibility is yours. More on early starts in another article.
- If another class start before your class, stay around 15m away from the start line while they are starting – that’s just courteous.
- There tend to be fewer boats on the start line during pursuit races so use these races to really try to be on the line and sailing as fast as you can when the start signal goes.

### **“Up, up, up” rule**

This is a variation on the ‘windward boat’ rule and is only applicable at the start.

We all know that a boat on starboard has rights over a boat on port. But what if there are two boats on starboard on the start line and one is close hauled while the other is sailing down the start line on more of a beam reach?

The boat which is close hauled has rights over the boat on the beam reach and the helm who is close hauled will shout ‘up, up, up’ at the helm who is on the beam reach. The boat on beam reach must turn ‘up’ into the wind, and in doing this may inadvertently go over the start line before the start signal. This is known as ‘being pushed over the line’ (and is a source of great satisfaction for the helm who is close hauled!).

This rule is the reason why you should **not** just sail down the start line waiting for the start signal – someone will push you over the line (or worse, your bow will put a hole in the side of someone else’s dinghy 😞).