

Guidelines for the Safe Use and Storage of Starting Pistols and Caps



Introduction

At most Little Athletics centres, starting pistols are mechanical devices which rely on a hammer being set by the user and released by a trigger action to explode a paper encased cap. These starting pistols are fairly inexpensive, are available through sporting goods outlets and do not require a permit or licence.

Starting caps are tiny detonators containing small amounts of sensitive explosive which can ignite from:

- friction, abrasion or impact;
- static electric spark;
- heat, contact with naked flame or other ignition source;
- contact with metal or sharp objects, including coins, keys, pens, fingernails, etc.



Examples of hammer style starting pistol and starting pistol caps

As starting gun caps are sensitive explosives, they have the potential to cause serious injuries from accidental ignition and improper use and can permanently damage hearing. In order to protect the health and safety of volunteers, centres must take care in the storage, instruction and use of starting pistols and caps.

Storage of Starting Pistols and Caps

When not in use, starting pistols and caps are to be stored separately from each other and securely in locked cupboards that are inaccessible to children or unauthorised persons. They should be kept in a cool place away from any heat source.

Caps must be stored in their original plastic container and clearly labelled as 'explosive'. If for some reason that is not possible, they must be stored in a secure, 'spark proof' container, that is kept closed at all times (except when caps are put into, or removed from the container) and the word 'explosive' must be shown clearly on the outside of the container, along with a reproduction of all other words in relation to safety which would have been shown on the original package. If caps are removed from the original packaging, then the paper sheet from the original packaging must be placed between any cap surfaces that may rub together.

At all times, follow the manufacturer's instructions and precautions for storage.

Access to Starting Equipment & Instructions for Use

Only authorised and trained users should have access to starting pistols and caps, and at no time should they be used or handled by minors.

Starting pistols and caps should never be left unattended.

All new starters must be given instruction in the safe use of the equipment and should be mentored by an experienced starter in order to learn correct starting and safety procedures.

Handling and Use of Starting Pistols and Caps

When using a starting pistol and caps, a starter must ensure that:

- the manufacturer's instructions are always followed.
- all caps remain in the original packaging except for the minimum number needed for immediate use (no more than 10 caps at the most are to be removed from the original packaging at any one time).
- any caps removed from the original packaging and not placed directly in the starting pistol are placed in either an empty cap packet or a dedicated non-metallic container and that the paper sheet from the original packaging is placed between any cap surfaces that may rub together.
- caps are never carried in pockets or placed in situations where friction or static electricity may cause ignition.
- caps are not exposed to high temperatures (including being left in the direct sunlight).
- caps are not exposed to conditions of impact and abrasion.
- when inserting caps into the starting pistol, care is taken to ensure no sharp objects come into contact with the caps (this includes fingernails, keys, pens etc.).
- only the pad area of the finger is used to push the caps into place in the starting pistol – never any sharp or hard object.
- when the starting pistol is fired that it is held at arm's length above the shoulder into the air.
- the starting pistol is not pointed or aimed at anyone.
- all other persons are positioned at a safe distance (at least 5 metres) from the starting gun area.
- all spent or partially spent caps are disposed of securely. Particular attention must be paid to ensuring spent or partially spent caps are placed in a secure container immediately after use.

Hearing Protection

Starters must wear hearing protection devices when they are firing the starting pistol (earmuffs with an SLC 80 rating of not less than 25dB; or ear plugs with an SLC 80 rating of not less than 25dB). Earmuffs are easy to fit and generally give the best protection.

All other people should be kept as far away as practicable from the starter during races. A minimum distance of 5 metres should be enforced. People who are within this distance (e.g. volunteers assisting with the starting procedure) are also required to wear hearing protection.

The starter will be responsible for monitoring this safety practice.

Alternative Starting Devices

Centres should be aware that there are a number of alternative starting devices that can be considered for use instead of a starting pistol and caps. These alternatives include:

- Electronic starting pistol and amplifier
- Electronic beeper gun with flash
- Starting clap board

References

Queensland Dept. of Education, Training & Employment, 'Health & Safety Fact Sheet – Starting Pistols & Caps', 2013
Victorian Dept. of Education & Early Childhood Development, 'Health & Safety Hazard Alert – Starting Gun Caps', 2014
Victorian Little Athletics, 'Safety Plan – Starting Pistol & Caps', 2000