

Advice for Event Advisers and Controllers – How to control SportIdent

This paper is intended to equip a Controller with sufficient information to be able to check that the organiser is using the SportIdent system effectively.

Technical information about SportIdent Equipment

(also at <http://www.sportident.com>)

Competitor cards:

SI-Card 5 The 'classic' and most widely-owned SI-card. Can hold 30 punches with code and time, 6 more with code only (but the order of visiting is known) plus start, finish and check times. Punching time 0.33 seconds. Card nos 1 - 499999

SI-Card 6 Can hold 64 punches with code and time plus start, finish, clear and check times. Punching time 0.13 seconds. Card nos 500000 to 999999

SI-Card 6* (These are rare) Can hold 192 punches with code and time plus start, finish and clear times. Punching time 0.13 seconds. Card nos 16711680 – 16777215 **Can only be used with SI-stations BSF-7/8**

SI-Card 8 Can hold 30 punches with code and time plus start, finish and clear times. Punching time 0.115 seconds. Card nos 2000000 – 2999999 **Can only be used with SI-stations BSF-7/8**

SI-Card 9 Can hold 50 punches with code and time plus start, finish and clear times. Punching time 0.115 seconds. Card nos 1000000 – 1999999 **Can only be used with SI-stations BSF-7/8**

All of the above cards are 'passive'; they have no battery in them and their lifetime is therefore almost unlimited.

Control units

All SI units can be configured as Clear, Check, Start, Control or Finish. The 'Stay Active' time can also be configured (the default is 2 hours). This configuration is done by connecting a unit to a computer via a 'Master' station.

The units are generally in Stand-by mode. However, when a unit is punched (and that first punch takes a relatively long time – 1 second), the unit switches to Active mode. The unit then operates normally until the limit of the Stay Active time is reached. But any further punches reset that countdown, so the unit only

switches back to Stand-by mode 2hours (or whatever the Stay Active Time has been set to) after the last person punched it.

There are a couple of 'special' SI cards that come with the kit. One is a 'Service-Off' card that will manually switch a unit into Stand-by mode. There is also a 'Clear Back-up memory' card.

The internal clock is temperature-compensated and is accurate to about 1 second per day. A special 'Time Master' station can be used to **synchronise** the clocks in the control units, or they can also be synchronised when the control units are connected to the computer.

There are two types of control unit currently being manufactured, BSF-8 and BSF-7:

BSF-8 This is the newer smaller size 101x51x19 mm weighing 62 g. The lithium battery typically lasts 3-5 years. The back-up memory holds 21802 punches and when full, the oldest data is overwritten. There is a display on the underside showing station type and code (clear, check, control 138 etc) and clock time. Using the Service-Off card to activate the unit causes other information to be displayed such as battery voltage, firmware version etc. The batteries can be changed by SportIdent.

BSF-7 This is the 'classic' larger size 115x62x32 mm weighing 148 g. It is functionally exactly the same as the BSF-8 except that the lithium battery has twice the capacity, typically 4-7 years.

BSF-6 and earlier versions had much shorter battery lives but the three-cell battery could be changed by the user. They don't have a display and are only compatible with SICard5 and Si-Card6.

The punching process

The following are the stages of the punching process:

1. Competitor inserts card into the hole in the unit
2. The unit reads the competitor's card (this is very quick)
3. The unit writes the control code and time into the competitor's card (this is the 'longest' process)
4. The unit reads the competitor's card to verify that it has been written correctly
5. The unit beeps and flashes and writes the card number and time into its back-up memory.
6. Competitor withdraws card

Decisions to be made in advance

Punching start or timed start. A punching start is more flexible but is not appropriate for top-level competitions. Note that if a start time exists in the card, then the results programmes will generally use it. So it is possible to use a timed start for most, but allow those who need flexibility (e.g. officials, split starters etc) to use a punching start. Some results software has an option which controls whether a punching start overrides the allocated start time.

Punching finish or timed finish. A punching finish is the only practical solution for very large numbers of competitors. For smaller numbers (e.g. a World Cup) the SI light beam unit system can be used but that requires very careful management to correctly associate the time that the beam was broken with the competitor, especially if competitors' bodies overlap on the finish line.

Back-up pin punch. The rules say (Appendix 4) "With respect to the *SportIdent* system, a backup needle punch must be present at each control. It is the competitor's responsibility to ensure that the electronic punch is in the e-card by not removing the e-card until the feedback signal has been received. If, and only if, no feedback signal is received, the competitor must use the backup punch."

Number of control units. Multiple units should be provided in the following circumstances:

- At the last control
- At the finish if a punching finish is used
- At early controls on a relay
- If a control site is heavily used (say more than 6 competitors per minute)
- When the standard of competitors using a control varies greatly so that some slower users (e.g. very young children, the elderly) may be impede more elite competitors

Only one control flag must be used at the control site, even though there may be multiple stakes (though at a punching finish, each stake should have a control flag).

Procedures

Checking the control sites

In many areas, stakes can be put out a few days in advance, perhaps with the flag collapsed on the ground. The controller can then check the position of most of the stakes in advance of the competition day.

On the day, the planner and helpers take the boxes out to the control sites. There is then no need for the controller to visit sites on the day, except for those few vulnerable ones which could not be placed in advance.

The planner should punch all the boxes before they go out to make sure they are working. And the planner must then read out the SI-card, to check that the

controls are correctly time synchronised. A SportIdent mini-printer is very useful for this. It is really annoying for competitors if any controls do not have the correct time as it messes up their splits, and it is a pain for the organiser to correct. The people placing the boxes should also have a cleared e-card and should punch them once they are in position as a final check that the boxes have not been damaged in transit.

Remember that control units will not beep when punched by a full SI card. So the planner and helpers must have sufficient cleared SI cards (SI-card 5 holds 30 complete punches and SI-card 6 holds 64 complete punches). The 'classic' mistake is for the planner or controller to declare that some units are not working, when in fact it was just that their SI-card was full.

A full SI-Card will actually switch BSF-7/8 stations from Stand-by to Active mode but there is no beep and there is no punching record in the SI-Card.

Spare units

The planner should have a few spare time-synchronised boxes to hand. They should have the code with which they have been programmed written on unobtrusively (e.g. on the underside) so that if one has to be used to replace a faulty unit, competitors are not confused. Note that the software will allow a replacement control code to be entered to cater for such eventualities. Spare clear, check and start units should also be prepared and available at the start, and a spare finish unit at the finish.

Hour change

If the event is on the Sunday of the weekend when the clocks change, then special care must be taken. The control units will not know about the hour change!

Control unit preparation

Before the event, the **back-up memory of all the control units should be cleared**. (That can be done with a special SI-card or via a pc).

The **voltage of all units should be checked** to make sure that the batteries are OK. On BSF-7 and BSF-8 units, this can be seen on the display on the back and should be in the range 3,30 V and 3,50 V.

For older units (BSF-6 and earlier), the estimated voltage (based on usage since the last battery change) can be seen when the unit is connected to a computer. However, there is a tendency for one cell of the three to suddenly go 'flat', so the only way to be sure about the voltage is to unscrew the box and check the voltage with a voltmeter.

It is vital that units are **time synchronised**. That can be achieved using a computer or by using the time master. Use of the time master avoids bothering with a pc (except to synchronise the time master itself to radio time).

The synchronisation steps are

- a) the start clock (if used) must be synchronised exactly to **non-digital** radio time pips. Note that digital radio time pips are delayed by several seconds.
- b) the time on a computer must be synchronised to non-digital radio time pips or internet time. (Beware of introducing unsynchronised times if a unit has to be re-programmed in an emergency, and the computer used is not itself synchronised)
- c) the time master is synchronised to the computer
- d) the time master is used to synchronise all the control units (or else all the control units are synchronised to the computer, but that is more work).

For a timed start and punching finish, all the above steps must be carried out.

For a punching start and punching finish only step d) is required.

It is **very important that for competitive events 'real' competitors do not find the controls in Stand-by mode**. The controller, planner or pre-runners must punch all the controls in the morning, and the Stay Active Time must be set so that the controls are still active when the first real competitor visits. (The default 2 hours is normally insufficient and should be adjusted; 6 hours will normally be adequate. Note, this adjustment only needs to be made once; it does not have to be repeated for each event).

In any case, **all control sites need visiting on the competition day** to ensure they are in position and intact, and all boxes need punching to check that they are working. For international events, it is always advisable to use pre-runners as a final check.

The Start

Spare SI cards should be available at the start, especially if the start is a long way from assembly. It is often helpful to have the clear stations at the exit from assembly which will reduce the number who will forget their cards. Of course a further clear station must also be available at the start to deal with anyone who has not cleared correctly.

An official should hold the check box in their hand and check all competitors' cards individually. A competitor who fails to clear their card will also probably not know what to do with the check box. The check box will only bleep if it can read the card and the card is cleared. Note that the start unit will also not bleep unless the card is cleared.

If a mix of BSF-7/8 and older (BSF-6 or earlier) units is used, then an older unit must be used as the check box in order to screen out any cards (such as SICard-6*, SICard-8 and SICard-9) which won't work with older units.

The start officials must be made aware of the importance of checking all competitors and returning the check boxes speedily to the results processing after the last starter has departed.

If a punching start is used, great care must be taken to ensure that all competitors punch the start box; beginners may not realise that they have to do that.

Late starters

If competitors are supposed to start at their given start time, then a clear policy must be decided in advance for late starters.

IOF Rule 22.9 states: *Competitors who are late for their start time through their own fault shall be permitted to start. The organiser will determine at which time they may start, considering the possible influence on other competitors. They shall be timed as if they had started at their original start time.*

If the competitor is only a few minutes late at the pre-start, it may be they can be advanced to the right line and can start at their right time. (In the rush, the official mustn't forget to use the check station.)

If a competitor has definitely missed their time, they should be set off as soon as possible but considering the possible influence on other competitors. That could mean setting them off on the half minute. A competitor hanging around is a drain on organisational resources (and is getting cold).

Normally, if the lateness is their own fault, then the competitor's time is from when they should have started. If the lateness is the fault of the organiser (e.g. the minibus taking competitors to the start got lost) then the competitor's start time should be adjusted. The late start official should generally not try to arbitrate. If it is clear that the lateness is the fault of the organiser, then the competitor should be given a new start time. Otherwise, the competitor's actual start time should be noted down, and the competitor can be left to complain to the organiser if he/she feels that the actual start time should be used.

The finish

If a punching finish is used, particular care should be taken to ensure that the finish units are synchronised. The finish banner should be placed in line with the finish boxes and a control flag **must** be placed on each stake to make the finish units visible to a fast-finishing runner.

In the case of a major relay, the finish units should be placed just beyond the finish line, and the results of close finishes (at least for the podium places) should

be determined by judges. That may mean a little editing of the finish times is required to get the order right.

Results

There are a number of different results-software providers. The results team must be very familiar with the software being used and know how to manage all the issues that arise during a competition. It is generally best to quickly move all “problem” competitors at download onto a separate troubleshooting desk staffed by an expert, allowing normal downloading to continue.

If a competitor has a **missing punch**, the first thing to check is whether there is an extra punch on their splits around the appropriate time with an asterisk. That indicates that they went to the wrong control. (Or if it happens with an early finishing competitor, it may mean the course has been entered wrongly to the computer and needs correcting, or a box has the wrong code programmed into it in which case the replacement control function can be used.)

If there is no punch in the competitors card for the correct control, and there is evidence that the control unit is functioning properly (e.g. most other people punched OK there), then the competitor must be disqualified.

Note that other evidence of being at the control is not acceptable, because the competitor must **both visit the control and punch properly**. In the case of SportIdent, punching properly means putting the SI-card in the hole and getting the feedback (bleep/light). If the back-up memory of the unit is subsequently read-out, it may well show that the competitor was at the control. But normally in such cases, it merely confirms that the competitor punched too fast. If the punching process has not been completed, the back-up memory will contain the card number plus an error code to indicate that the punching process did not complete. The competitor must not be reinstated on that evidence. Rule 20.5 states: *A competitor with a control punch missing or unidentifiable shall not be placed unless it can be established with certainty that the punch missing or unidentifiable is not the competitor's fault. In this exceptional circumstance, other evidence may be used to prove that the competitor visited the control, such as evidence from control officials or cameras or read-out from the control unit. In all other circumstances, such evidence is not acceptable and the competitor must be disqualified. In the case of SportIdent, this rule means that:*

- *If one unit is not working, a competitor must use the backup provided and will be disqualified if no punch is recorded*
- *If a competitor punches too fast and fails to receive the feedback signals, the card will not contain the punch and the competitor must be disqualified (even though the control unit may have recorded the competitor's card number)*

If there is a problem with a control (misplaced or stolen) to such an extent that no acceptable result can be produced for the competition, then the course must be declared void. It is tempting to try to ‘correct’ the problem by removing the splits either side of the relevant control, but this means that competitors are not being measured over the planned course and introduces distortions such as unfairly benefiting runners who lost time on the subsequent control. IOF rule 24.15 says

The results must be based on competitors' times for the whole course. No changes may be made to these times on the basis of split times.

Identifying missing runners

The check stations must be delivered to the results processing after the last start so that their back-up memory can be downloaded and the software can then know who really started. Note that it is very important that the back-up memory of the check boxes was cleared before the event. Once the check boxes have been downloaded, lists of missing runners can easily be produced.

It is worthwhile being careful about the combination of check station version, master station version and software as some combinations work better than others. *It is important to test the download method in advance, to avoid delays on the day.*

Results publication

On the afternoon/evening after the event, the split times should be uploaded to sites such as:

- WinSplits
- Route Gadget (if available)
- SplitsBrowser

Splits comparisons are very interesting in the few hours and days after the event, but interest declines rapidly with time.

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I would be pleased to receive suggestions for improving/updating this document.

Changes since the last version – September 2008.

- Note added to say that some software gives the option whether a punching start overrides the timed start or not.
- Statement removed: "But if the lateness might be the competitors fault, then they must not be given a punching start" because this does not necessarily override the timed start.
- A new note about how best to handle problems at download.