

Close-up on the 4 x 100-metre relay

Track relay races depend on teamwork. The 4 x 100-metre relay is especially exciting because it's so fast. Four sprinters on each team combine to circle the track once. A light baton is passed from one runner to the next. The race is often won or lost in the baton passes.

Only the first runners use starting blocks in relay races. Runners pass the baton to their team-mates in the changeover zone. If the baton isn't passed within this zone, the team is disqualified.

The baton is a hollow tube 30 centimetres long. As a runner finishes their leg of the race, the baton is passed to a team-mate. Ideally, there's no fumbling in the hand-off. But this simple action is difficult at top speed. If a runner drops the baton, they must pick it up, even if it means leaving the lane. A dropped baton costs seconds and can cost the race.

There are two types of passes. In the upsweep pass, the receiver stretches one hand back, palm down, with thumb and index finger in a V shape. The approaching runner puts the baton into this V and releases it once the receiver grips it. Less safe, but faster, is the downsweep pass. In this pass, the receiver holds their hand back, palm up and doesn't look back.

