

Off to a Good Start

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Финиш: finish line, finish, unbelievable (slang)

Once upon a time, Russians borrowed the words *старт* (start) and *финиш* (finish) from sports matches. Then, in their infinite collective linguistic wisdom, they turned them into verbs — *стартовать* (to start) and *финишировать* (to finish), as well as adjectives — *стартовый* (starting) and *финишный* (finishing). Along the way, these words came to be used in a few other, nonsport contexts.

Easy-peasy. Oh, except for a slight problem for English speakers. *Старт* and *финиш* can't always be translated as start and finish, and they are usually not synonyms for *начало* (start) and *конец* (end).

Let's start (*начнём*) with *старт* and related words. *Старт* refers to the starting line in any kind of race, the moment a race begins or the moment a flying object launches off the starting pad (*стартовая площадка*). At a sports competition, someone shouts *На старт!* (On your mark!) or uses *стартовый пистолет* (starter/starting pistol) or *стартовый сигнал* (starting

signal).

Стартовать is used to describe an athlete's or other competitor's actions off the block (called стартовая колодка for athletics and стартовая тумбочка for swimming). As someone slangily said of an athlete: Он стартовал неважнецки (He got off to a pretty lousy start). It can also be used to describe the first sporting events of a season: В воскресенье стартуют две полуфинальные серии чемпионата России по хоккею (On Sunday two semifinals for the Russian championship in hockey will get under way). Or it can be used to describe the beginning of any activity that is competitive — like politics: В пятницу стартовала президентская предвыборная кампания (On Friday the presidential election campaign kicked off).

Lately, the launch meaning of стартовать is sometimes used metaphorically: В Петербурге стартовала новая туристическая программа "Белые дни" (A new tourist program called "White Days" was launched in St. Petersburg.)

Стартовый (starting, startup) is used in financial and economic texts, probably as an new borrowing from English: Как же найти стартовый капитал? (How on earth can you find startup capital?)

And then there's this idiosyncratic use of the adjective стартовый as a kind of all-inclusive neuter: А сможешь ли ты дать стартовое своему ребёнку: вырастить, выкормить, выучить его? (Can you give your child a good start in life: raise, feed, and educate him?)

At the end of the race is финиш — the last moments of a competition or the finish line. Будем надеяться, что мы дойдём до финиша (We're hoping that we'll make it to the finish line). Финиш and the related verb and adjective are used a lot in politics: Яблоко и Явлинский всегда плохо финишируют (The Yabloko party and Yavlinsky always finish in the back of the field).

Финиш can also be used to describe the endpoint of some action that has been long and arduous — a piece of work, apartment remodeling or a marathon spring-cleaning session. When you're almost done, you can say: Работа приближается к финишу (We're heading into the final stretch).

When that marathon work session has irreparably damaged relations with your significant other, co-worker or contractor, you might say: Всё! Это финиш в наших отношениях! (That's it! Our relationship is finished!)

In slang, финиш can also mean something extraordinary, either good or bad. When you discover your contractor has absconded to the south of France with your money before finishing the work, you can say: Это — финиш! (That tops it!)

Начнём сначала, что ли? (Are you saying I have to start all over again?)

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