

Contesting 101

By Kirk Pickering, K4RO

Hello testers, new and old. In November 2007, I heard that K0AD was looking for someone to write a column for hams getting started in contesting. AI had received feedback that the NCJ should include more information for the new tester. It would help greatly to understand our audience, and what you are looking for. The more feedback that we have from you, the more that we can tailor the column to suit your needs. Everyone is a beginner relative to someone else, and there is a lot of ground that we could cover. Since you are reading the *National Contest Journal*, you have probably already discovered that contesting has something to offer you. My guess is that as NCJ readers, most of you are not brand-new to contesting, but no question is too basic. Please don't hesitate to send me your questions or comments. I can be contacted via e-mail at k4ro@k4ro.net, or via my call book address. I look forward to hearing from you.

Why contest?

Perhaps a good place to begin is to ask the question, why get involved with contesting at all? People enter the sport of radio contesting from many different places, but usually for the same reason -- it's a lot of fun. While this may seem like stating the obvious, it's an important point to keep in mind, and I will refer back to this simple concept. There are many different ways to have fun contesting, and not everyone's idea of fun is the same. Some of us get a kick out of the simple act of "Can you hear me now? Yes I can!" In contests, we get to repeat that feeling over and over, and it's a non stop thrill.

For some operators, staying up all night to the point of utter exhaustion, scraping QSOs out of the noise level is fun. For others, running high rates for hours on end is fun. Some operators find their joy in serious competition, and some find their satisfaction in winning. Other operators enjoy mixing radio contesting with travel. Some find their joy in building the ultimate station. Some enjoy building teams and competing in the multi-operator categories. The point is to find out what rings your bell, and then go after it. Some testers seem to like a challenge. There are plenty of challenges to be faced in contesting.

There are aspects of contesting which may not be considered "fun" by some standards. Fierce QRM, exhaustion, frequency fights, poor conditions, and geographic disadvantages can test a tester's spirit. Testers manage to find joy in the operating, even under adverse conditions. Some are driven by determination, others by competition. Contesting has a special appeal, regardless of the circumstances. There is something that keeps us coming back. Successfully dealing with the challenges of contest operating can result in great personal satisfaction.

One aspect of contesting that many find appealing is that there is always room for growth. I've heard from folks who have been contesting for over 40 years, and they still learn something new during every contest. There are many challenges and opportunities for learning. Whether it is operating technique, antenna design, propagation knowledge, or station construction, your imagination is the only limit to how far you can take it.

Playing by the Rules

There's no doubt about it; contesting can be a lot of fun. So where to begin? My recommendation is to find the nearest contest and start making QSOs. However, there is one

thing that we need to get straight from the beginning. Read and understand the contest rules, and then follow the rules every time. This is a vitally important point. Contesting is a sport of honor. The only real thing of value that we can "win" (besides our own satisfaction) is the respect of our peers. It's really quite simple. Play by the rules each and every time. Don't be tempted to cheat because "nobody is watching." The truth is, many are watching, and your reputation is at stake. While cheaters are rarely publicly ostracized, the climate is changing, and more are discovered every year. Again, respect is the only thing that we can "win" in the contest community. Play by the rules from the start, and you'll be on the right path towards earning respect from your contesting peers.

Learn by Operating

One of the myths that I would like to bust is that there are "secrets" to contest operating. I first heard this concept from K5ZD in a Dayton suite about ten years ago, but it took me a long time to understand what Randy was saying. After a few years of contest operating, I looked at the winner's scores and I thought, "there HAS to be some secret that I'm missing." The truth is, there were DOZENS of things that the winners were doing which were beyond my understanding at the time. I thought that if I read enough NCJ articles and Internet posts, I would eventually uncover these "secrets," and then be on my way to the winner's circle. Now don't get me wrong. Reading the NCJ is very important, :-) and there are lots of things to be learned from our peers on the Internet. But the real way to learn the "secrets" of contesting is to OPERATE CONTESTS. Again, this may seem like stating the obvious, but this is how contesting skills are learned. Like learning to play a musical instrument, there are no shortcuts. Proficiency requires practice, period. It is through *time in the operating chair making contacts* that we learn the techniques and subtleties of contest operating. Simply put, the more time that you spend operating contests, the better you will become at it. While specific operating techniques will certainly be discussed here, there is simply no substitute for time spent in the operating chair.

It's You against the Clock

There is one feature which all contests have in common. They have a finite operating period. There is a start time and an end time, and your goal is to use that time as efficiently as possible. Using your time wisely is one of *the* most effective ways to improve your contest scores. Efficiency is the name of the game. The best operators are able to use every minute wisely, and they are always concentrating on making the next QSO. One obvious tactic is to use as much of the available operating time as possible. If a contest allows ten hours of operating time, operate for ten hours. If a contest allows for 48 hours, operate as much of that time as you can. In future columns we will discuss ways to use each minute more efficiently. Efficiency and accuracy are the goals of the contest operator.

Identifying Call Signs

Another feature which all contests share is the need to quickly and accurately identify signals. Determining a station's call sign is perhaps the single most important skill for a contest operator to develop. The goal is to be able to determine a signal's complete call sign the moment that the call sign is sent. Whether in Search and Pounce (S&P) mode or running stations, the quicker that you can become at identifying call signs, the quicker that you can complete a QSO, and proceed to the next one. The best contest operators are able to identify a station with one call, regardless of signal strength. Some operators can even identify a station when one of the characters is wiped out, based on acute timing skills, their knowledge of active call signs, and propagation conditions.

How do I start making contacts?

There are so many contests to choose from nowadays, that just about every weekend presents an opportunity to hone your contest skills. Read through the contest calendars available on the Internet (search for WA7BNM Contest Calendar) and look for contests featuring your favorite mode and/or bands. Study the rules and figure out the exchange. Turn on your radio and find the band with the most activity. Set up a blank logbook page with columns for the exchange information, or use one of the many contest logging programs available. Tune the bands and listen to some of the activity, and find people making contest contacts. Listen to a few QSOs to get a feel for the rhythm of a contact, then, wait no longer! Call someone and make a QSO. Log the information for the contact, and then go make another one. You are now on your way to learning the skills and thrills of contest operating. Now go make some more contacts, and please don't forget to send me your questions or comments.

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