

Contesting 101

By Kirk Pickering, K4RO

Where to begin?

Many of the questions that I receive from beginning contest operators boil down to essentially the same thing -- "where did you guys learn all of this stuff?" The question may take different forms, but it often includes the desire for some resource which will reveal all of the "secrets" of contesting. The big secret is that *there are no secrets*. Like it or not, contesting knowledge is gained through experience, pure and simple. We discussed this concept in the very first *Contesting 101* column, but it comes up time and again. A recent post on the CQ-Contest reflector illustrated the point very well, and I would like to thank Rick ZL2HAM and Tom VE3CX for allowing me to share their comments.

I chose Rick's question because it is very representative of the kind of queries an astute new contester might ask. While I have tried to address some of these items in previous *Contesting 101* columns, I must confess a certain feeling of helplessness in trying to do so. The reason is that the answers to these kinds of issues are really best learned through experience. No amount of reading or studying will substitute for time spent operating. It's probably *the* most important point to make clear to a new contest operator. So, without further adieu...

Rick ZL2HAM posed the following question. *"Does anyone know of a good source of tips for contesting strategies? It's still new to me, so I'm trying to work my way up the learning curve (on the SSB side). I'm looking for things like details on how to best make use of a second VFO, strategies for switching between running and S&P, if/how/when to pick up QSOs for stations not participating in the contest (when allowed, of course), how to best leverage spots, when to submit a spot and when not to, pileup management (on both sides), radio management (transmit bandwidth, memories, voice recording, etc), and so on."*

Learning from experience

Following is a reply from Tom VE3CX. I think Tom really hit the nail on the head. His suggestions apply regardless of your mode preferences, location, or goals.

Hi Rick

I am mentoring a new contester along, and I have a good idea of what you are looking for. Basically, it boils down to one thing - *experience*. Each of us had to start from zero, and work up from there :-). The more you operate, the better you get at it.

What I would suggest is that you make an effort to spend time with your radio - learn all of the features your radio has to offer. Do the same thing with your contesting software - spend time with it, and learn its features.

As much as possible, take part in various QSO parties, and any contests you can find. There is some type of contest on most any given weekend - jump in and make a few QSOs! This way, you can see first hand what works for you, and what does not work well.

In the California QSO Party this past weekend for example, I participated and found out that I have a few issues with the station. From my perspective, it was better to find out now, rather than during the CQWW that will happen in a few weeks time. QSO parties are great for working out issues in advance of a big contest.

I also attended a contest forum earlier this year, and one of the speakers made a very good observation. You need to market yourself. So - how do you do this? Well - by being very active, people will start to recognize your call. Promptly answer QSLs, and make sure that you answer all bureau cards. You don't want the casual op thinking "That cheap so-and-so. I sent him a card and he never bothered to reply". You want to leave everyone - both the big AND small guys with a good impression of yourself. You don't need to send everyone a QSL card - just promptly reply when folks send you one.

When the band is open, try and run stations. I hear the big EU stations do this on a regular basis. Why? It puts them on the other end of a pileup - then you can see first hand what works and what does not. Can you go for a DXpedition to somewhere close by (not a huge cash outlay?) Some places offer "rent-a-shack" accommodations. Again - it puts you on the other end of a pileup, but before you do that, you want to make sure you have at least some pileup skills. I am sure you have heard some folks struggle with a pileup - try and learn what they are doing wrong, and learn from their mistakes.

Listening to the radio is a great help. You start to gain a feel for how the band sounds, time-of-day conditions, who is active (makes picking them out in a pileup easier), etc.

Last - but not least - smile, and have fun! It shows, and it makes ham radio the truly fun hobby it should be!

Tom - VE3CX

Thanks to Rick and Tom for their input. I second Tom's recommendation to get in as many contests as you can. Operate the QSO parties, and try different modes. Spend more time on the radio, and less time on the Internet. Find active testers near you, and share your enthusiasm with them. Turn on the radio and put on the headphones - the "secrets" of contest operating are all right there, just waiting to be discovered.

That's all for this time folks. A recent [written in 2009] tragic loss in the contesting community has raised our awareness of the fragile nature of life and comradeship. Our hearts go out to the friends and family the C6APR team: W2GJ, K3IXD, K4QO and W3PP. May we all respect the memory of our fallen brothers in radio. Please send me your questions or comments, whether you are a newcomer or an old timer. I can be contacted via e-mail at k4ro@k4ro.net, or via my call book address.

73 Kirk K4RO