Contesting 101
By Kirk Pickering, K4RO

Call Sign and Exchange Databases
There was a thread recently on the CQ-Contest reflector regarding the use of databases to "suggest" call signs or exchange elements during a contest. Most contesting software provides one or more functions which allow the use of such databases. First I will explain what these databases are, and how they might be used. Then I will consider whether the use of these tools will help you become a better contest operator.

Super Check Partial
There are essentially two different types of databases used by contest logging programs. The first (and oldest) database is the venerable "*Super Check Partial*" and is available at the following link: http://www.supercheckpartial.com/. The SCP database is currently maintained by K6TU. It is available in various formats for different logging programs. The (original) website describes SCP as follows:

"*Super check partial is a feature that K1EA first introduced in his CT logging software. It enables the use of a database to extend the list of calls that appear in the check partial call window. Used correctly, it can help you more quickly pull a call out of the QRM. Used incorrectly, e.g. to guess calls, it can result in stupid mistakes and significant score reductions. Caveat emptor! The files provided are set of super check partial databases created using tools developed by Jim, AD1C and Ken, K1EA. The source of calls is from logs that were contributed by active contesters. These logs are combined and filtered so that they result in a fairly good (but not perfect) list of active contest calls. The files can be used with CT, WriteLog, TRlog, SD, N1MM Logger, NA, Win-Test, and others.*"

Essentially, the SCP database provides a quick look-up of possible call signs, based on what you have typed so far. For example, if I type "K4R" the SCP look-up window might list something like "DK4RL IK4RUF K4RDU K4RG K4RO K4RX." It provides a short list of call signs which contain the characters "K4R". There are also variations on the theme, such as displaying all call signs which are only one-character off from what you have typed. For example, if I type "K4RO" the SCP look-up window might list "K4RO K4RX K4RG K4AO K4KO" indicating that I might have missed a letter somewhere. The prevailing sentiment seems to be that the SCP database is useful as a "sanity check" to determine whether a call sign is correct. If that sounds maybe just a little bit like guessing or picking calls from a list to you, then you are not alone.

Exchange Databases
A second type of database capability is available which goes beyond "helping" to copy call signs. These are the "Exchange" or "Call History" database look-up tools. These databases are typically created from log files, and they can store exchange data associated with a call sign. The first program that I was aware of with the capability was TR-Log. My understanding was that N6TR created the function so that he could call his JA friends by name during a contest. The function was expanded in several logging programs to the point where specific exchange elements could be stored and retrieved such as Name, State, Grid, Check and so forth. Some exchange databases are available for download like the Super Check Partial files. Most exchange databases are custom-built, using logs for a specific contest. Some programs can even auto-populate the exchange fields with the necessary data. All that was necessary was to type a call sign (guessed from the SCP list if necessary) and boom – there

was all of your exchange data ready to log! Again, if this makes your eyebrow raise a little bit, then you are not alone.

Previous QSO in the Same Contest
There is another type of call history and exchange look-up function available in most contest logging programs. Let's say we are working the NCJ North American QSO Party, where QSOs and multipliers count on all bands. The first time I work W9WI in the contest, I enter his name and state (DOUG TN.) The next time I come across W9WI on another band and enter his call sign, DOUG TN automatically appears in the exchange field. In other words, the program assumes that the exchange data has not changed during the contest. While this type of pre-fill is probably less of a gray area ethically, it can still cause problems. The biggest problem is that if you make an error in the exchange the first time, that error will carry over to subsequent QSOs if you simply allow the pre-fill data to be entered. I once lost a contest (came in 2nd after log checking) relying on the pre-fill. Always copy what you hear over the air, and these errors will be minimized.

The Illusion of the Pre-FIll Database
I've built and used SCP and exchange databases, but their use has come at a cost. I was convinced that my scores would benefit from their use, and I figured that not using them would put me at a competitive disadvantage. Here is my real world experience using SCP & pre-fill databases.

For several years I maintained a Super Check Partial database made up of only the call signs that I worked from my own station. I was aware of the publicly available databases, but I found that they contained many call signs that I never heard or worked. So I stuck with my own self-generated SCP, hoping to keep any database mistakes to a minimum.

Once the exchange look-up feature became available in TR-Log, I used it. If figured my competitors were probably using it, so I'd better get with the program. I only used data generated from my own contest activity. Since I was very active in the contests, my look-up databases were well-populated. I was convinced that the pre-fill data was saving me from typing a considerable number of keystrokes, and giving me a competitive advantage.

However, I came to find over time that those saved keystrokes came at a cost. I would get lazy or tired, and just accept what was already in the call sign or exchange window -- without completely verifying what I had heard. This was especially true if QRM was fierce, or the second radio was covering up the desired signal. My error rates did *not* improve as a result, and neither did my operating skills. I also found that the pre-fill data distracted me from my primary operating function on the radio -- which was paying attention to the audio stream in my ears, and not the visual input from the computer.

I came to feel that using the pre-fill databases literally degraded my copying skills, primarily through distraction. I found myself second-guessing whether I had actually copied something correctly, and my concentration would go downhill. Eventually I just quit using the databases, and I've found that I enjoy operating more without them. It was kind of like learning to find DX again on my own, after falling into the seductive trap of having others do it for me during the early DX PacketCluster era. I still use an exchange pre-fill in the CWTs due to the completely static nature of the exchange and high rates, but typically not for other contests.

My suggestion is to get on the air and operate a lot. The more that you operate, the more that you will become familiar with call signs and exchanges. Learn the names of your fellow contesters by operating the CWTs, NAQP and Sprint contests. Note also that pre-fill databases are not allowed at WRTC, the "Olympics" of radio contesting. Competitors at the highest level are expected to copy what they hear. Learn to do that from the beginning, and you will see your skills develop to their fullest. Bottom line -- copy what you hear over the air, and don't be fooled by the lure of the pre-fill database. It won't help you become a better operator, and it probably won't help your scores in the long run either.

That's all for this installment. See you on the bands, and don't forget to submit your log to the sponsor, no matter how many QSOs you made. Your log submission improves the potential log checking potential accuracy, and will also allow you to receive a log checking report to learn more about your own accuracy. Please send any questions or comments to me at k4ro@k4ro.net. **73,** --Kirk