

Contesting 101

By Kirk Pickering, K4RO

Starting a Contest Club

A letter from Dave NJ4F asked “How about an article on how to start a contest club. Mainly what rules/obligations are needed to be met, so that the club is recognized for contests. For example, I have heard that the members must live within 50 miles, etc. And how it all works in general. Or where can I find this info?”

While I mentioned the importance of joining a contesting club in a previous article, Dave's questions seemed very important to address. Not everyone has a contesting club available in their local area. Sometimes the only way to join a contesting club is to form one! I decided to ask some of the folks who were instrumental in starting the Tennessee Contest Group to share their thoughts for the article. K0EJ and WO4O both played crucial roles in the formation of the TCG, and their comments are sprinkled throughout the article. While some of this information is specific to the origins of the TCG, the general principles should apply to any group considering forming a formal club.

Start With The Operators

K0EJ reflects on the early days of the TCG. *“I think the start was building on a core group of operators who wanted to play in the NAQP contests.”* There were folks in the Nashville area operating the NCJ contests who became aware of the team competition. A few of them decided to form a team and submit a score together for one of the NAQP contests. A contest club can start that simply! After winning the team competition for that event, the operators decided to try it again. Even more importantly, they decided to invite others to participate along with them. I remember receiving a “cold call” from Ric WO4O (then WA6KUI) one evening, asking if I would like to join the newly forming Tennessee Contest Group. Ric, Mark and others took the time to call and write active operators whom they heard on the air. Note that this was all before email and the Internet. Those attempts at personally contacting hams were likely the single most important step in forming a new contest club. In this day and age of the Internet, that task is probably even easier to do. WO4O found operators by scanning the contest results. When Ric saw a call sign from TN that he didn't recognize in the contest results, he made an effort to contact that ham. Field Day was also a recruiting ground.

WO4O: Invite those that share a common interest and purpose to join your club. Search the published contest results for call signs of contest stations and operators in your area. Create a database from which to begin recruiting members. Send out invitations to join the club via QSL post cards and emails. Make eyeball QSOs at ham fests and invite prospective members. Members are constantly recruiting new members. Our club cannot have too many club members. The more, the merrier.

K0EJ: As we decided to expand from our humble start, Ric was really good at looking at logs and contest results to see who was already playing. People like to be noticed for their efforts. It was just a matter of asking if they wanted to play with us. We still compare notes about who we worked in TN during 160M/SS/etc.

Meetings

At the time our club was forming, there was virtually no structure, no leader, and no formal

organization. We simply met for breakfast once a month and talked contesting. Mark notes that those early days over coffee allowed us to build a bond. Being new to contesting at the time, I remember those early meetings with great fondness. There seemed to be unlimited enthusiasm and a lot of camaraderie. It was one of the things that got me hooked on contesting. After competing in several NAQP events, we wanted to try competing as a club in ARRL sponsored events like the Sweepstakes and 10 Meter contests. The ARRL required that clubs have a formal constitution and roster, and hold regular meetings. We were making the meeting requirements, but we had no formal organization or roster.

WO4O: As an ARRL-affiliated Club, the TCG was obligated to meet the monthly 'Eyeball QSO' requirements, which was really a benefit insofar as this solidified many relationships that continue through today. Later, our club also began meeting at the QTH of different TCG members for Show & Tell and to conduct official business. This was a more intimate setting and touring the different contest stations was a valuable learning experience."

K0EJ: Meetings are now random events. Two things come to mind. Having a means to communicate/share ideas is truly a crucial part of a vibrant club. Even though we are now a "virtual meeting club", the local clusters still meet at random intervals. Having someone that can create that comm-link, whether its a reflector, a group e-mail address, or even a phone tree is crucial to keeping the club alive. Secondly, we have minimal official infrastructure - truly a KISS-principle. We do request/accept/whatever when someone wants to fill a niche. We still have "meetings of opportunity" but mostly for the social aspects. We don't do "business" at these events.

I've come to believe that eyeball meetings are very important to any club. Several years ago, the ARRL dropped the meeting requirements, and the TCG moved towards the Internet as a means of keeping in touch and conducting business. It was an era when fewer folks seemed to have the time for meetings, and before long, all of our interaction was conducted online. While I have played a big role in moving the TCG online, I feel that something very important was lost when we quit having regular eyeball meetings. There is a human factor that simply does not come across on the Internet. If you can find a way to keep having face-to-face meetings, I strongly recommend it.

A Club needs a Name

By this time we had begun calling ourselves the "Tennessee Contest Group" which was the name coined by Jim K4AMC. A name is important to help establish an identity for the club. Eventually, we adopted an eye-catching club logo, which we try to spread around whenever the opportunity arises. There is a similarity to marketing a "brand" in business. It takes time, but eventually the brand starts to become recognized with perseverance.

Organization

WO4O: Establish a "government" in your club. You'll need: a leader (president), a deputy leader who's in charge when the leader cannot make it (vice president), perhaps a secretary, and, if you'll be collecting "dues" (donations from the members that go towards the club in some way), a treasurer. The TCG opted to name our primary leader as "Facilitator" and our deputy leader as "Executive Assistant." We don't have a secretary or treasurer. The leaders or 'officers' need to share a common vision, possess knowledge, skills and abilities that compliment one another, exhibit a servant's attitude, be Peacemakers and volunteer their service to the club for one year. It's important for the club leaders to encourage and carefully

consider all member's viewpoints. Don't let the "leader" business get to your head because either the members will overthrow you or they'll just leave.

Rules and Boundaries

WO4O: Now that you have order established in your club, you'll need to have some rules. Get together with all of your members and make up rules that everyone thinks are fair. These rules should have imaginative consequences to go along with them when they are broken (i.e., if you don't contribute a radio contest score to the club over the course of an entire year, you're kicked out of the club until you contribute a qualifying score.) These rules are subject to change; make sure the best ones are kept. Mark, K0EJ, drafted a Constitution and By-Laws and introduced it to the club, accepted input from the membership and together we voted on a final version which is posted on the club website.

K0EJ: The leadership was VERY informal until we decided to attain ARRL affiliation. I stole from other club constitutions, and pared it down to a minimum as we didn't want to get bogged down in admin. We just wanted to build/play/get better/have fun! I really wanted to name our leader "Grand Poobah" as I use to like the Flintstones but wanted a neutral name, more of a cheerleader than a "leader". We flew the constitution by our small Nashville-area group, most said "sure, whatever..now let's go play on the radio". It has been revised (we had to struggle through our constitutional conundrum to allow virtual voting) but the key (I think) was to avoid specifics/overhead. Keep it vague enough that the leadership/club can be flexible to handle most of what comes up. Let the club "leaders" do the "business".

Different contest sponsoring organizations have different definitions of club boundaries. Some contests (such as the NCJ-sponsored NAQPs) allow teams without geographic boundaries. ARRL defines three different sizes of contest clubs: Local, Medium, and Unlimited for their contests. Club boundaries might be defined by a circle with a specified radius, or a geo-political boundary such as an ARRL section. Some contests allow contributing points from a DX-pedition operation outside the country. In short, the club boundary is can defined by a particular contest's rule, or by the club simply choosing a boundary. Sometimes the boundary choice depends on the club's competition goals. Several years ago, TCG played a major role in getting the ARRL to allow a club boundary to be defined by the ARRL section boundary. It was the only way to include everyone in the state, from west to east.

Keep the Focus on FUN

WO4O: Target and promote fun opportunities for membership participation, on-air and off-air. Zero in on radio contests that encourage Team and/or Club Competition and rally the troops to exhibit team spirit by getting on-air, entering contests and crediting the club with scores. Create opportunities for Individual and Club recognition. Greg, K4KO, maintains and publishes a Radio Active Report (designed to recognize the radio activity of individual members and the club) and he serves as the Webmaster for the Tennessee QSO Party (TNQP). Doug, W9WI, reintroduced the Party, and is the official log checker and organizer. Members help other members with various projects. Our club's Prime Directive is: Have FUN!

K0EJ: Again, let people contribute/fill niches. We embrace ACTIVITY. Nothing makes us happier than to hear of how many TN stations someone worked. We have a few "superstars" who sometimes share their secrets, but mostly it's just the sheer numbers of stations/Qs that has given us some notoriety. We strive to be inclusive - and we have embraced new modes and mobile operations. In some cases, its been some of the new guys teaching us old-timers

how much fun different modes can be (e.g. mobiling in state QSO parties and RTTY contesting.)

We have individuals dedicated to running different functions of the club. Some these functions include running the Tennessee QSO Party, managing the Radioactive Report , putting together T-shirt orders, running the web pages and email reflector, managing club QSL cards, and sponsoring plaques.

Club Goals

K0EJ: Other than to have fun, I believe the club goal has been to do well in NAQP - our roots so to speak. We (OK, I) have had a goal of getting enough players to be an unlimited club. We will never win club competition in a DX contest. A long time ago we chose to support local clubs' FD efforts vice having a "club effort". It was good PR and a recruiting tool. We share the spoils of victory - club plaques go to the high scorer for the event. We try to "give back" by authoring articles, contributing to programs at ham fests, and so forth. We share resources – whether it be pieces and parts, or physical help with antennas. We try to help solve problems and answer questions as a group.

So there you have it. Really all it takes to start a contest club is the willingness to do it. Like most organizations, there will be 20% of the people doing 80% of the work. Remember that lots of folks like to *belong* to something that they feel is worthwhile. I think that once folks get a taste of the enthusiasm that contesters bring to the table, they will want to share in that enthusiasm. Remember that a contest club can be as simple as a monthly coffee meeting. I hope that some of you might be inspired to gather with your fellow contesters, and maybe consider forming a club if yo don't already have one.

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. Please send any questions or comments to me at k4ro@k4ro.net. **73**