

Contesting 101

By Kirk Pickering, K4RO

Welcome back to Contesting 101. As I write this article, Dayton is only a few weeks away. I have been QRT for a few months because of damaged antennas and a feed-line relocation project (my YL calls it "landscaping.") I hope to be back on the bands in time for the WPX CW contest, and fully QRV by the fall contest season.

The Art of The Possible - Gaining Perspective

One aspect of contesting that took a while for me to figure out is what I now call the "art of the possible." After several years of operating, sometimes in frustration at why "the east coast always won," I started to gain some perspective on the contesting game in general. I grew to understand the impact of specific limitations upon my scores. Some limitations I could work towards overcoming, like my CW copying ability. Other limitations, such as the geographic location of my station, were fixed. Wishing to operate my own station, and not interested in moving to a different part of the country, I chose to work within my geographic limitations. I later discovered that even top operators could not win a major DX contest in the Single Op All Band High Power category from multi-tower stations in east Tennessee. So what was the point if the game was stacked against us?

One of the unique aspects of radio-sport competitions is that the beginners are competing in the same game as the seasoned professionals. Featherweight stations compete on the same bands at the same times as the heavyweight powerhouses. Folks operating from the "Black Hole" of the US mid-west operate alongside stations within spitting distance of the Atlantic Ocean. Guys with a tri-bander at 50 feet are in the pileups against stations with monoband stacks up 200 feet and higher. I've heard from newcomers who got turned off from contesting by the seemingly impossibly un-level playing field. Let's face it -- operating a major DX contest from an area with poor propagation using low power and a low wire antenna is like trying to drive a go-kart in the middle of a NASCAR race.

Understanding The Competition

So what is the beginning contester to do? I found it helpful to take a moment and realize what I was up against. For starters, most of the guys beating me had many years (if not many decades) of experience which I did not have. They spent hundreds (more likely thousands) of hours honing their operating skills, and I was not going to catch up overnight. They also had spent years (often decades) building, improving and investing in their stations. They knew how to get the most out of every piece of gear. In short, I had to develop some respect for just how tough the competition was, especially at the top of the game. Overnight wonders were rare, and the same operators and stations were found at the top of the score lists, year after year. I realized that if I wanted to rise up in the score standings, it was going to take a lot of effort and practice before I was even worthy.

Capitalize on Your Strengths

Once again, the path towards improvement begins with operating a lot of contests – DX, Domestic, State QSO Parties and of course the NCJ Contests. Operate the big ones and the small ones. The more contests that you operate, the more you will learn about the capabilities and the limitations of your station. You may discover that you do better in certain kinds of contests. Try to figure out why. Talking to other local testers in your area can give you some insight, but there is no substitute for on-the-air experience. Find out for yourself when

the bands open and close by being on the air during the contests and paying attention to patterns that you discover. You may discover some weaknesses that can be addressed within your time and budget limitations. You will also ultimately find limitations that cannot be overcome without starting over again at the realtor's office, perhaps in another state or country.

For example, I discovered that I could place higher in the standings in domestic contests than the DX contests, in part because of my favorable geographic location for domestic contests. I also discovered that having the largest station was not quite as important in the domestic contests. The DX contests seem to require more hardware for success, especially on the lower frequencies. The hardware "arms race" is constantly escalating, and I was limited in real-estate and resources. I found that I could place higher in the Low Power and QRP competitions. Some of that was due to the fact that the top-tier operators at the super stations tend to compete in the High Power categories, leaving a "smaller pond" of competition in the other categories. State QSO parties provide a great competitive environment. A super station is typically not required to achieve top honors in a state QSO party, just great operating skills and perseverance. I haven't given up on SOAB DX contests; I've simply adjusted my expectations to something within the realm of possibility. Regional write-ups have been a helpful motivator to measure scores among closer peers in the DX contests.

Constant Improvement

The main thing to strive for is constant improvement. The real joy is in the operating and the learning, not simply in winning. I realize that it sounds cliché, but it's true. I still operate the big DX contests, even though my chances of winning SOAB are next to nil. Every contest has something to offer, and something to learn from. Also, sometimes miracles DO happen – but you have to be present to win. Sometimes it takes decades for a win to happen, but wins do happen to the dedicated contester. Operate whenever you can. Make your own advantages wherever possible. A great station without a great operator is very unlikely to win, but a great operator at a capable station will always be a serious competitive threat. Technology is necessary and can make a lot of difference, but it's the operator who really matters in the end.

Guest Operating

I hope to host a future article on guest operating, written by someone who has a lot of guest operating experience. All of my guest operating has been done in multi-ops, but there are several top competitors who regularly operate in the Single Operator category from stations built and maintained by other hams. It is not uncommon these days to find much of the Top Ten box filled with champion guest operators who traveled to competitive stations in order to maximize their chances of winning the contest. The "arms race" can be quite intense at the top, and the new SOHP scenario has been described by OH2BH as "Formula 1" style – where an entire team supports the efforts of a single operator. The point is, if you are planning to compete at the highest levels of competition and cannot build a super station of your own, you had better start developing relationships with station owners who can help you toward your goal. Most importantly, you must develop your skills to the point where you will be considered worthy of a seat at a super station.

Everyone is *not* cheating

Another thing to keep in mind is that the vast majority of contesters DO play by the rules. While there are some cheaters out there, chances are very high that the person who beat you in the last contest was NOT cheating. More likely, they just out-operated you, and that's that.

While cheating is something that should be taken very seriously when it is encountered, the newcomer should realize that huge scores are possible without breaking the rules. Some folks have the technical skills to build very efficient antenna systems and conserve every dB. Their 100 watts may sound like a kW to you under certain conditions, but it's very likely not. To put it quite bluntly, competitive contesting is not about complaining. While there may be plenty of things to complain about at any given moment, the whiners rarely improve as much as the folks who concentrate on becoming better operators. Work on improving your own scores, and let the contest adjudicators worry about how to handle the bad apples.

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. It helps you, helps the sponsor, and helps the sport of contesting. Please send any questions or comments to me at k4ro@k4ro.net. **73**