

Newcomers and Elmers Net: Contesting for Beginners AK3Q 11-03-13

Contests are a good way to learn how to operate efficiently, quickly, and precisely (all good for emergency situations, too!)

Contests can get hairy – but don't be intimidated by them; if possible, work with someone more experienced, or try a few "dry runs" – in other words, pretend you are in the contest and copying calls – play both sides, call-er and call-ee

-- once you get the flow of things, and what information is being exchanged, you can try it out

-- use contests to practice before worrying about entering one; and start small when you do

Contest Dos and Don'ts

First, READ THE RULES- ALL contests operate from a similar perspective:

- 1) Operate within a fixed time period
- 2) Operate using specific modes and/or bands
- 3) Operate using a fixed exchange
- 4) Attempt to contact as many people within the contest rules as possible (if a DX contest, DX stations only; if states, only US and territories, etc).

Exchange –

Normally ALL exchanges contain your callsign, a signal report (EVERYONE IS 599 or 59) and some other specific information (this is why you have to know the rules first!).

-- This could be your state, grid square, CQ Zone, ARRL Section; sometimes it is a serial number which starts at 01 and counts up with each contact

-- Most are short exchanges such as (AK3Q) "please copy 59 04" or "roger, please copy 59 Kentucky, KY, QSL (shorthand for "do you copy"?)

Practicing both sides helps take away some of the stuttering/fumbling/hesitation you are likely to do, but even if that happens, don't sweat it! Few people will even notice, much less say anything; if they do, just remember they did the exact same thing more than once too

Styles

There are several operating styles you can choose between:

-- Search and Pounce is where you tune up and down the band looking for stations and calling them as you go

-- Running is where you sit on a particular frequency and call CQ and wait for others to come to you; this is probably best left until you are very

confident in what you are doing in case of a pile-up

Length

Most contests run over a weekend, but some are during the week, like sprints

- keep in mind the times of the contest – most are listed as UTC and must be converted to local time (for us that just changed from –4 hours UTC to -5 hrs UTC)
- Some contests run less than 24 or 48 hours - Sweepstakes, Field Day (not technically a contest!), Sprints are sometimes 1 day or less
- Some contests have a maximum time with the restriction that you can only operate a fixed number of hours mandatory breaks

Scoring

- Each contest has a scoring system, usually points, which are determined by the type of contacts you make
- a contact usually equals 1 point; working the same station on multiple bands may entitle you to multiple points (using something known as a multiplier)
- a multiplier can be something as simple as working folks in different states (maybe you work 30 states and a state is worth 2x points – for those contacts your points are multiplied by a factor of 2)
- some contests allow for multiple points for being a rover – this is a station (usually in a car) who moves from county to county, or state to state to allow others to get multiple points)

Contact Techniques

Depending on the size/interest of the contest there may be a lot of people or there may be less, but typically there are many stations calling at once

- there are also many stations with loads of power, so you might think you can't possibly be heard –WRONG!
- all of the contests I have worked I have done with 100 watts or less, and I get heard (and I don't get heard too!)
- sometimes you just throw your call in there with the rest of the world and hope you get a call back (this is one advantage of sitting in one spot calling CQ – you become the one people are chasing!)
- timing of call – you will learn that sometimes putting out your call a few moments after that initial rush of calls gets you heard (a secret of those in the know!)
- you have to learn the flow of the station you are trying to call – listen for patterns and then use them to your advantage

- sometimes you just move on and come back later (having a notepad handy for calls and frequencies is useful if you want to return)
- always put out your full call—don't give into the temptation to use a shorthand version (kk4jlb becomes jlb); that's against FCC rules and unsportsmanlike conduct!!)
- operate with respect to others, to yourself, and to the hobby—always!

Respect the Calling Station's Procedures

Sometimes an operator will ask for a specific number, region, or prefix—respect that! He or she is trying to manage the craziness, and it really works better for all

- if your number or prefix isn't coming up right away, make note of the frequency and come back a bit later
- sometimes stations work split frequencies – the station holding the frequency will call on that frequency but listen for responses on another – this is harder for you, but easier for everyone over all—less noise, confusion
- You can usually tell because the station will say something like AK3Q QRZ UP FIVE. (or the plentiful frequency police will announce it often!)
- Unfortunately lots of people forget to set their split, don't hear it, or just plain ignore it.
- its stupid to ignore the split instruction because usually the person is only on his frequency when he is speaking, and then listening on the other frequency
- A good run station WILL NOT acknowledge stations calling on his transmit frequency unless it has been specified as being allowed.

Logging

It is always important to have a good log because you don't want to call the same station twice on the same frequency and waste their time (or yours!)

- this is known as a duplicate (easy to do, but try to minimize how often this happens)
 - computer software is great for this as the logging programs will have some means of letting you know
 - also if you are officially entering the contest you must submit a log to the group or organization hosting the contest
 - the logs are usually easier to deal with for everyone if they are on computer, usually in Cabrillo format (your software will know how to convert to this); but paper logs are sometimes acceptable, but this is rapidly going away
 - if you are going to enter contests learn to use logging software!
 - all contests have deadline, so follow those closely – you snooze you lose!
- You will find categories of stations..
- Single OP (SO) One operator
M/2/Multi-two - Two operators

Multi-Multi/MM - Multiple operators, multiple transmitters.

SO2R - Single operator using 2 radios at the same time (yes.. it IS done and it is somewhat of an art form to see it done well)

Start Small with Contests in the US:

- You don't need a huge station to participate. Fifty watts to a dipole will work well, even less
- Not as frantic
- QRM levels are usually a bit lower than the DX events. There's more room for the little guys.

The major contests in the US are:

ARRL November Sweepstakes = CW - First full weekend in November.

SSB - Third full weekend in November.

- NCJ North American QSO Parties -- CW - Second weekend in January & first weekend in August ; SSB - Third weekend in January and third weekend in August

NCJ North American Sprint == CW - Second weekend in February and first weekend in September; SSB - First weekend in February and second weekend in September

A sprint is a contest where a station that initiates a QSO (for example, by calling "CQ") must change frequency immediately after the QSO, without working any other station on the same frequency. The reason for this is that in normal contests, high powered and rare stations can get a significant advantage by "running" - calling "CQ" and then working stations one after another on the same frequency, which can result in a very high QSO rate. By forcing the station to change frequency, the "sprint" format prevents stations from "running" and evens the odds for the smaller station.

There's also a bunch of State QSO Parties such as Ohio, Texas, and Florida, and California QSO parties (KY is coming up next weekend, I believe!)

Resources:

http://www.qsl.net/zs1an/contesting_faq.html

<http://www.arrl.org/on-the-air>

<http://www.cqww.com/>