

RadioSport

How to Enjoy Contests

Amateur Radio contests have been around almost as long as the hobby itself. A contest involves working as many stations as you can, usually in as many different geographical areas as possible, in a pre-determined amount of time (24 or even 48 hours). These areas could be DXCC countries, CQ zones, states, ARRL sections or provinces depending upon the particular contest. Points are earned for each QSO and in many contests there are multipliers – for example you multiply your QSO point total by the number of countries you work. Regardless, the object of all contests is to have fun. Contests are exciting, busy, challenging and above all they can be beneficial, because they offer you an opportunity to test your station, your operating skill and your ability to handle high volumes of traffic in a short time.

You can enter a contest with the most basic of stations because there are many ways in which to participate in any contest.

1. The Casual Mode is an easy way to get your feet wet in a relatively low-stress contest environment and have fun at the same time. Normally, you would operate in the “Search and Pounce” (S&P) mode, calling only those stations that you specifically want to work. They may be countries that you need for your DXCC, or perhaps just those you can hear the best. You simply pick the stations that you want to work. Interestingly, for the big world-wide contests, you will find many stations showing up specifically for the contests that are rare the remainder of the year. Often, relatively rare countries will be activated for the express purpose of a contest. As a result, contests can provide new and often rare opportunities for some different and unusual contacts.

2. Helping out other contesters – Even as a casual or part-time tester, you can be very important to other contest participants, especially those going for the highest scores, by simply giving out points in a contest. Towards the end of a contest, when the “Big Guns” have worked nearly all the other “Big

Guns” and most of the other serious participants, your QSO will be greatly appreciated, because it could make the difference between winning or losing for that station.

3. Full Participation – “Blood and Guts” – Going Full Out: In this case, enter the contest for as much time as you have available and during that time, compete flat out. This does not mean that you need a station costing tens of thousands of dollars. There are many categories in most contests – low power, high power, QRP and single band – in fact there is a category to fit every station budget and every operator skill level. However, some preparation work is required. First, you should fully digest the rules for the contest. Next select the category that suits you best. Then work on a band plan – in other words, determine (from propagation charts or propagation prediction programs that are available on line) which bands will be open to which location at what time in order to maximise your overall productivity. Down time planning is equally important. What are you going to do about meals? And how many hours or how few hours of sleep do you need? And of course, another important factor to consider is what the rest of the family is going to do during that time. You don’t want to be known as the “contest widow maker”!

4. Picking the Right Contest for You – When you are getting started in contesting it is important not to dive into the deep end prematurely. There are a wide variety of contest types and intensities. For your first few contests you would be wise to stay clear of the “world-wide contests” (unless you are just planning on operating S&P) and to pick contests that are somewhat less competitive. The 80m contest that the Nova Scotia Amateur Radio Association runs each winter, or the two Canadian contests that are sponsored by Radio Amateurs of Canada are excellent contests for the beginner. The pace is generally a bit slower and the operators more friendly and forgiving.

5. Multi-operator – If none of the above fits your

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personal situation, you can join a multi-operator station. Multi-operator stations fall into three categories: Multi-Single (multiple operators, one radio), Multi-2 (multiple operators, 2 radios), Multi-Multi (Multiple operators, multiple radios). Multiple operator events such as Field Day are great places to get experienced in contest operating even though Field Day is technically an emergency preparedness exercise; however, those with the best Field Day scores demonstrate their ability to handle high volumes of traffic in the most effective manner. All of the big worldwide DX contests have Multi-op categories. Multi-op contesting can be lots of fun. Multi-op contests are a great time to share the fun and excitement with great friends. Another way to become involved in contesting and to learn new contesting techniques in a less stressful environment is to arrange a multi-operator contest from your Club's station.

6. Know the contest exchange – All contests require a precise exchange of some basic information. If you do not take the time to know what is expected during a contact you will slow the other station down and, if they are highly competitive, they may not be very happy. Therefore, knowing what is required will help you make friends, if not improve your overall score. You can find out what is required by looking in most Amateur Radio magazines, DX bulletins or the internet (a Google search on the contest name will get you everything you need) or simply talk with other local operators. As a last resort, just listen to the contest on the air for a few minutes and you will quickly see what the exchange protocol is. Without valid exchange data in the log the QSO is invalid and will not count for points.

Contests can be found now on almost every weekend. Many Hams complain that contests clutter up the band. Well, there is no doubt about that; they certainly can create a lot of mayhem. But at the same time, they also produce a lot of activity and, after all, if the bands are not active they may just

come under the envious eye of other interests looking to expand their own spectrum allocation. The old adage "Use it or Lose It" certainly could not be more appropriate when it comes to Ham band allocation retention. In spite of the contest activity on the main bands, there is NOT, and hopefully never will be, contests conducted on the WARC bands of 12, 17 and 30 meters. This gives other operators a place to go if they truly do not want to participate in a contest. It is also a good idea to respect nets during contest times. There are also certain frequencies that are used by special interest groups such as the Slow Scan TV group that operates on or about 14.230 MHz, and the daily Marine Mobile net on 14.300 MHz for emergency marine traffic. These are both frequencies to avoid during a contest.

Contesting exercises you and your station in a number of beneficial ways:

- You quickly learn how competitive your signal and your station are compared to others. When the bands are quiet, QSOs are relatively easy to make; it is only when the bands become jammed with thousands of other signals during a contest that your ability to get through to other stations is truly tested. This can be quite an education!
- Develop your operator skills – your hearing, typing (if logging on a computer) and CW skills, all improve greatly by participating in contests. Because the data being exchanged in a contest is relatively routine and repetitive, you can copy CW at speeds twice what you would normally copy. Try it, it's true.
- You will become very familiar with all of the controls on your radio. You will gain experience in using your filters, passband tuning, split frequency, etc.

Operating in a contest with multipliers can get very exciting, especially if you are located in an area that

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has minimal activity in the contest. As a result, you may be a multiplier for many stations and this can make you the prey rather than being the hunter. In such a situation it is possible for you to work three, four, or even five stations per minute. That is super exciting and can even cause panic for the uninitiated. Here in the Maritimes we have another strategic contest advantage – the opportunity to travel to one of our many IOTA (Islands on the Air) Islands and operate during the annual IOTA contest each July, where you could very well be the only station on the air from that multiplier.

Contesting is truly exciting. It can get the blood flowing, and can be good for you and for your station. Contesting and DXing are the two driving forces that send the designers of radio equipment back to

the drawing board to make radios of even higher standards of performance. Virtually every development in the field of radio communications was experimented and developed through Amateur Radio. The nature of the competitive spirit in us all is largely the root of that driving force.

You never know how well your station is working until you enter a contest!

Give it a try and enjoy it. Have fun.

Dick Grantham – VE1AI

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