

How to be Competitive

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This article, by Rob Hummel, WS1A, discusses ways to be really competitive in an HF Contest. He writes:

If you want to be competitive, you must be positive. Here are some suggestions.



Acquire as much knowledge as possible about the contest. First, learn the rules of the contest. That means knowing the exchange and the scoring. It also means understanding what strategy you should use to maximize your score. Figure out how long should you chase a multiplier and how many Qs do you need to be competitive. Figure out if a multiplier a 3-point qso is more valuable to you toward the end of the contest. Calculate how many mults you will need to be competitive.



Decide where to point your antenna and when. You must understand how propagation affects your area. Read the propagation forecasts and make sure you understand them. Know where your greyline goes. Know when 40m opens and 20m closes. Keep an extra antenna and radio tuned to popular 10m frequencies (you know them because you researched, right?) to check for band openings.



Study the local competition. Study the scores, multipliers, and prefixes worked by those in your area. Call them or write them and find out their strategies. (Of course, they may not want to tell you!) Ask for copies of their logs. Study where they pointed their antennas and when. Find out what bands they favored and why. Anyone who beats you is in a position to teach you something. Instead of reviling them, study them. Don't forget the other end of the spectrum. Some of the most valuable lessons I've learned have come from low-power stations with wire antennas.



Know the field. Study the contest results from the past 2-3 years. You must know the calls that were active. You must know if any special DX stations be on. You should know who you'll be listening for. You must know the frequencies that JAs can use on 80m. You should know the 40m allocation world-wide. You should know where VKs will be on the low bands. Instead of figuring out why the contest is unfair, learn how to work it.



Improve your station. Learn the truth about feedline matching, antenna loss, VSWR, directivity, and gain. That means read and study. That

means experiment. That means cut and try. Shrug off the myths embraced by the mediocre. Don't listen to people who tell you that 2:1 SWR is good enough because all the power goes somewhere eventually. Or that 9913 is lossless at HF. Or that a 1 dB difference in a signal is unnoticeable at either end. Or that connector loss is negligible. All those statements are lies. Find out why. Work on your antennas. Nothing is perfect or stays that way. Put up new antennas. Try wires. Try loops. Try beverages. Try low-noise receive antennas. Try slopers. Try, try, try. All these antennas are relatively low-cost.



Learn your radio. All (well, most) of those knobs on your radio have a purpose. Find out what they do. Read and study the manual. Do you know where the manual is? If you can quickly set a split frequency, you might be the first to work a new station of 40m. If you learn how to use those 100+ memories efficiently, you can stack up big stations and throw your call in rapidly to 2, 5, or more stations simultaneously. Get all your filters in place. Get a voice keyer. Learn your DSP. Get a better mike. Tweak the audio until it sounds crystal clear and with all the punch of a buzz saw cutting through aluminum. Remember that setting for the contest, then turn it back to mushy so the boys on 80m don't complain.



WORK the contest. If you're going to work a contest, then, by God, WORK IT. A 48-hour contest runs for 48 hours. If you want to be competitive, you will run for 48 hours too. Hey, if you can't, then you can't. But then don't whine about not winning. The single biggest weapon that a small pistol has is persistence. I've heard lectures from big guns where they advocate switching bands when your QSO rate drops below 60/hour. That's okay for a big gun, but here are some surprising statistics:

- At a rate of 60 Qs/hour, you would work 2,880 stations in a 48-hour contest.
- At 30/hour, you'd work 1,440 stations in a 48-hour contest.
- Even a rate of 15/hour (only one QSO every 4 minutes!), you'd still work 720 stations in 48 hours!

How many Qs did you work in the last contest? I've WON contests where I didn't make 720 total Qs. Cherry pickers don't win. If you give up when the time between Qs stretches out to 4, 6, 10, or more minutes, you give up your competitiveness. A contesters' mettle is measured in the dead of night when calling CQ endlessly on a seemingly dead band or when tuning 20m or 40m or any other band straining to pull that next new station out of the noise. (Hint: This is where 1 dB or less makes all the difference in the world.)



Have fun. Winning is fun. But so is competing. It's great fun being a

part of an overall event that's larger than some petty self-centered concern about whether your QTH is "unfairly disadvantaged." If you want to have fun in a contest, find people who are having fun and do what they're doing. Don't be poisoned by the facile argument that a contest where everyone isn't a winner is unfair and unfair is no fun. Everything is fun if it involves amateur radio.

- I love working SSB, CW, and RTTY contests -- although my skill in each mode varies widely.
- I love domestic contests. I don't like the spate of non-SASE cards they generate, but I answer every one -- I will NOT be responsible for discouraging a ham for a few bucks.
- I love DX contests. Every time I hear GW4BLE or ON4UN or EA7USA it's the same thrill.
- Every time someone remembers my call I light up like a little kid. Gosh, they remember me!
- I love working the all-Bulgaria QSO party and being the only USA entry -- winning with 4 QSOs!
- I highlight my name in every contest result that published. What a thrill! Any contest I miss I consider a failure. Every contest I make is a victory.



Conclusion(s). If you like contests or think you might, understand that there are hundreds and thousands of like-minded souls out there who want you to be the best you can be. We'll help, encourage, and congratulate you for every QSO you make and every log you submit. Every DX station is looking for you. Every QSL you get is a thank you. Ignore the bitter, the miserable, and the perpetually dissatisfied. They're not your competition; they're QRM.

Planning a Contest

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• This page contains a number of tips and techniques to help you plan a contest.

The following techniques have been recommended by experienced contesters writing to the CQ Contest Reflector. All credit goes to the writers of these articles.



From Fred, K3ZO

For many of us it's good enough to get on and just have fun in the contest. This means that you get on when you want and operate as long as you want and quit when it stops being fun. For those who are seriously hoping to improve their scores, however, there is no substitute for careful planning.

After some of the post-contest stories I have written, I have received private e-mails from folks in propagationally-challenged areas saying, in essence: "What you've written is all fine and good, but out here where I live there is just no way I can run up a decent score." I have replied with my stock first reply: "All right. Tell me what your operating plan was for the contest and I'll try to help you work out a better one." About half the respondents come back with: "WHAT operating plan?"

Ladies and gentlemen, the cardinal underlying principle for serious contest operating is: YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHY YOU'RE DOING EVERYTHING YOU DO.

I'm a little tired of reading on this reflector how the log checking has become too stringent; how the rules need to be changed "so that the contest is fair"; how one's location is so hopeless that there is no hope of having any fun in the contest, etc. etc.

How many of the writers of messages which fall into the above categories have ever drawn up a complete plan for the contest in question before the contest starts? Yes, conditions can change suddenly and you may have to improvise, but you should have a plan for that too.

There are pieces on the contesting.com Web site by people such as Randy, K5ZD which lay aspects of contesting out in much more detail than I will

here, but in general, before the contest starts you should ask yourself the following questions and have the answers in your head if not formally on paper: (Obviously these are questions a North American operator would ask. Some of the questions might be different for stations in other parts of the world.)

- What band will I start on? Why?
- What band shall I try next? Why?
- How low should I allow my ten-minute rate to get before I decide to change bands?
- About what time should I plan to hit each band and why?
- How much time and when should I plan to take time off the first night so I am fresh for the European run Saturday morning?
- What signs will tell me that propagation is deteriorating and what should I do about it?
- How do I vary my pile-up technique depending on what the operator I'm calling is doing?
- How many times should I call in a pile-up before going on to the next pile-up?
- What signs tell me that it's time to stop S&P'ing and that instead it might be possible to get a run going?
- At what times on each band should I look for multipliers in Africa? South America? Oceania?
- When do I take time off on the second night?
- If a particular antenna, rotor, or piece of gear fails, how do I work around it?

There is no set answer for any of the above questions, because the answer will be different depending on one's category, antenna system, age and location. But if you're serious about score, all of these questions should be asked and answered ahead of time to the best of your ability.

I'm sure others can suggest questions I haven't put in here. I would offer only one suggestion. It pays to look carefully at the bands for about a week before the contest to help you plan your operating pattern. It's much better to observe for yourself than to try to make IONCAP or VOACAP or George Jacobs' column do the job for you. If you can't be on certain hours because you're at work or school, check out the packetcluster when you get home each day to see what people in your area were working at what times on what bands.

Good luck then! And no complaining later if you didn't do any planning!



From Dave, K8CC

Fairly early in my contest career, I was somewhat surprised to learn that there were patterns to propagation and activity in DX contests. Up to that point, I had simply sat at the radio and worked whatever I was presented with. This is the difference between the casual contester, who simply sits down and operates, and the serious contester who has a plan to take maximum advantage likely conditions and activity.

The first question to answer for a given contest is whether you plan to operate full or part time. Even a part time effort can be "serious" if it is executed with a plan to maximize the score rather than simply spending a few hours in the operating chair. I'm not saying the latter can't be fun or should not be undertaken, but you'll like learn a lot more (and make more points) by preparing and operating to a plan.

In most contests other than a Sprint or NAQP, fatigue can or will become a factor. The point at which it does varies between individuals, and there are techniques to improve your physical conditioning or to better accomodate fatigue. The longer the contest, the more important it becomes to manage fatigue. You still may reach a point where you have to reach down inside and just "push through", but this is a lot easier if you have a plan.

If you're planning multi-op effort, there are more options for dealing with fatigue. The trick is to schedule a crew that has ENOUGH people so that nobody gets burned out, but you don't want TOO MANY operators so that people are standing around with nothing to do. With a multi-op, the activity plan is simple - there is no excuse for not working everything. In the major DX contests (CQWW, ARRL) there are no off times so whenever the single-op is away from the radio its hurting the score - the key is to MINIMIZE THE DAMAGE.

For the single op, the key to planning your effort is to categorize the different forms of activity and band openings, and then attack the bands on the basis of priority. Do what is important, and DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF. If you're playing DXer on some band when there is rate to be had on another, you're likely to be losing the contest. The key to single-op planning is to be ready to capitalize on the good times, and simply cope with the bad times.

The corollary to to "don't sweat the small stuff" is DON'T MISS ANYTHING EASY. This means spending enough time on a band to work all of the "easy"

multipliers, but don't spend so much time that another (more important) activity is overlooked. Part of this is knowing who the "big" or "relatively local" stations are, and not missing them on any possible bands.

As an example, here is Michigan the single op typically must think like an East Coaster - that is, RUN EUROPE WHENEVER POSSIBLE. Our openings don't last as long, and the signals aren't as strong, but this still has proven to be the best strategy for us. Openings to Japan have to be anticipated, but the quality of the opening will determine whether this is more productive than pursuing Europe on a lower band. At all other times, the W8 single-op is playing DXer so activity patterns will be dictated by band conditions and the size of his or her station. In general, the slowest times are the middle of the afternoon and the middle of the night, so these are the best times (or to look at it another way, the least bad) times to take a break or get some sleep.

One tip for abbreviated sleeping is to always plan to sleep in multiples of 90 minutes. Some years ago this was written up in the YCCC newsletter that your body sleeps in 90 minute cycles, where it goes down into deep sleep then comes back up to shallow sleep. Its a lot easier to wake up from shallow sleep. The first time I tried this was at Dayton after a late night hospitality suite tour. It works!

Again, all of this requires a plan. Experienced DX contesters have this engrained into their brains - its called EXPERIENCE. Whether you're going to do a 48 hour full gonzo effort, or 12 hours sandwiched in between family responsibilities, having a plan will likely result in more points per hour in the chair, and that's what we're all after.

73, Dave K8CC