

K1AR on the secret of success - 2005

Shhhh...it's a Secret!

You know, this radio stuff is actually pretty easy. Unfortunately, it has become overly complicated by the technoids/over-analyzers of the world, most of which have never actually won a contest. So, here's the secret to winning (and don't tell ANYONE ELSE):

- 1) Put up some decent antennas at a reasonable location that favors your interests in contesting (e.g., NM for SS, NH or D4 for CQ WW). Beams are good -- doesn't really matter what kind or how many elements. Try to include some device to turn a few of them. Wires add value. Verts can be good, too.
- 2) Buy a couple used IC781s
- 3) Buy a couple of decent amps that put out around 1500W +/-.
- 4) If you really want to hang out there, get some SO2R crap and wire it all together.
- 5) Install a PC with a logging program.
- 6) Wait for your favorite contest and operate it.
- 7) Send your score in.

The following are evil distractions:

- 1) Any new radio product
- 2) Kenwood anything other than an 850 or perhaps a 930
- 3) IC-pro blah, blah, pro, blah, blah
- 4) Unmodified FT1000blah, blah
- 5) Electric fences
- 6) Ice

Other advice:

- 1) Stop reading all of the endless technical banter that people write about this subject and use your newly acquired free time to get on the air and become skilled at understanding propagation, callsigns and your station.
- 2) Operate enough so that people know your call by simply sending the first few dits.
- 3) Answer your QSLs.

If you do most of the above, you will do well in contests. Again, my only request is for you to please keep this information to yourself.

73 John, K1AR

N5KO on what REALLY makes you good - 1996

> If I were in your class, what would I appreciate about your ability or technique? Or in other words, what would
>another highly accomplished contester know about your skills that I miss because I'm just an awed "apprentice"?
>(If you're too modest to talk about yourself, apply the question to the your personal contesting "hero", the guy you
>vow to beat this year.)

In my view, this is one of the true dilemmas of radio contesting. You, as the hypothetical "apprentice," do not have the knowledge or experience to be able to appreciate the skills I have developed that make me the hypothetical "major league contester." And similarly, I take for granted many of the fundamental skills that are necessary for you to advance to the next level.

I like to offer up two quotations that sum up my general beliefs on the topic. The first is from someone in my peer group, and second is from someone who I would categorize as a personal contesting hero from my formative years in contesting, although I doubt he actually knows this :-).

"With experience comes knowledge and cunning. I can't stand here and tell you the secrets, as many of them are second nature to me now." -- KROY/5

"The best of the best gained their winning edge practicing the basics over and over in numerous forgettable events, often using inadequate radios and second-rate antennas. Discovering how to overcome such obstacles are lessons never forgotten." -- NCJ Profile of N6RO

And now for a bit of a digression:

I have observed many "second tier" (and others down through the neophyte ranks of) contesters think that there is some set of winning "tricks" that the "first tier" contesters use to beat them, and if only someone would let them in on these terrific secrets, they would be first rate contesters themselves. These people are setting themselves up for disappointment, because I'm going to let them in on the biggest secret of all:

"There are no secrets!"

It turns out, as with most things in life, that skill and hard work pay the most reliable dividends in the long run.

Now for some specific advice. None of these things are mandatory to win, but collectively they really add up:

- Know the code. 50 WPM conversational is a nice milestone --note: don't try this at home with pencil and paper.
- Know the bands. Nothing like knowing the right band to be on to improve your score.
- Know your station. Knowing whether or not your station has the gusto to run people or crack pileups under given conditions on a given band is a real time saver.
- Stay in the chair. You can't be the loudest station on the air if you are not on the air.
- And now for some general advice:
- Operate a lot. Experience is king. I learn something every time I operate.
- Solicit advice from a variety of experienced people. Some of the "experts" will be more compatible with you on a personal level than others, so shop around and get a variety of points of view.

To wit, after I post this message, I will get a few notes from various folks, about half of which will say "I really identified with what you wrote. You're a genius!" and the other half of which will say "You're a moron. Get stuffed!"
--Trey, HC8N (QSL via AA5BT), WN4KKN/6

How do you get better? by K5ZD - 2008

"How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" the guy asked his cab driver. The reply, "Practice. Practice. Practice."

I think we all can acknowledge that practice is an important part of learning and improving any skill. Sports players practice, sometimes for years. Kids learning musical instruments practice. Very few people are a "natural" who can just pick something up and be instantly good at it.

Why does no one ever talk about practice with regard to radio contests?

I find the SS CW contest is the best single thing I can do to be ready for WW CW. Why? Because it lets me practice my SO2R techniques. After doing SS CW, I find I can sit down in WW CW and immediately go into SO2R mode without much thought or effort.

Other ways to practice in radio contests:

- Start at the bottom of the band and see how fast you can search and pounce your way to the top. Then go back to the bottom and do it again. The first time is about knowing how to acquire the next signal and dump in your call (or decide to keep tuning). The second pass is the valuable one. It helps you practice call sign recognition, duping skills, and how to dig between the fast loud guys.
- Work a QSO party or smaller DX contest that is focused on one area. See if you can work every station you hear from that area. Again, this helps you practice recognizing signals from a target area and duping skills.
- Work Field Day running high power. No better simulation for practicing running skills. :)
- Work RTTY contests to learn SO2R skills. In RTTY, the computer is doing the brain work and the QSOs have a fairly consistent timing and pattern. This frees you to practice the keyboarding skills of jumping between the two logging windows. For even higher level of practice, try running on two bands at the same time (while never transmitting on two bands at once). The goal is to do it so smoothly that no one listening can tell what you are doing!
- Search and pounce in a contest using low power. Almost everything I learned about busting pileups came from my early years in ham radio with 100 watts and wires in trees. You take a different approach when you are not the loudest guy in the pileup. Learn that different approach and then be amazed when you apply it while running a KW!
- W4AN used to do work in his shack with two radios turned on listening to two different stations. He would practice copying both. You probably won't be able to copy solid on both, but you will learn how to quickly shift focus back and forth. The goal is to get this skill happening without thinking.
- Get on the air between contests and make some QSOs. Nothing helps your CW sending more than having to think and send at the same time. :)

Most of all, have fun!

Randy, K5ZD

Improving concentration by K5TR – 2007

> operators, and I'm struck by the fact that I do not seem able to consistently get the sort of results they do, even
>from the same station. This is particularly the case in hell-bent contests like the CW Sprints, but I have the same
>feeling about the first evening in Sweepstakes, and to a lesser extent in the big DX contests.

There are more things (than) just focus and concentration - I think much of it is learned by operating many many contests until most of the operating actions and techniques become second nature. It has been very interesting to me over the last few years hosting different operators here at my station. One of the ops has been WM5R - and since he has been coming back for a number of contests year after year I have gotten to see his operating skill evolve.

When Ken did his first ARRL 10 meter contest from here there were a number little things that he was doing or not doing that were making an impact on his score and rate. But the one thing that really struck me was not any one operating style or error - it was that when he was running stations that was about all he could do. He just did not have the mental bandwidth to do anything more than run stations on one radio and get them in the log. He could not think about where he should turn the antenna or answer a short question from me or for that matter use a second radio.

Over the years I have seen this change, Ken can now process much more information, he can use the second radio, he can answer my questions etc. He is no longer just doing all he can to work guys and get them logged.

I have seen this evolve slowly over time and each year of the 10 meter contest he was doing a better job of operating. It was not only the 'mental bandwidth' issue but many things that were learned by doing contests over and over - improving his skills with each one.

I still almost always learn something every time I operate a contest.

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-- George Fremin III - K5TR