

Joining in the Fun of Contesting – Three Perspectives

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June 8, 2020

Hello Fellow Hams,

So, what's this contesting stuff all about?

This article is intended to inspire and help you take your first steps into the wonderful world of amateur radio contesting, also known as Radiosport. 'Contesting' is a blast! I started to learn the basics of contesting at our great US/Canadian annual operating event, the ARRL Field Day, in 1974 at the ripe old age of 13. I watched the pace of the CQ's, the quick exchange of information and then onto the next contact (QSO) in just seconds – *I was hooked!*

Like so many endeavors of life, contesting takes some practice and patience. But the journey as you start and then improve is very rewarding and you will become a better operator in all your other ham activities too. You will have more confidence in your ability to do what hams strive to do – set up and operate a radio more competently.

As a ham for 49 years, I have done many different and enjoyable ham activities but I always gravitate back to contesting as the most fun for me. Curious? Ok, let's get started down the path of contesting: *Warning – it is addictive!*

There are contests for many different kinds of ham radio interests, but they all involve maximizing your ability to make accurate and efficient QSO's with other testers. You can find contests for all modes – SSB, CW, RTTY, FT8 (and more), AM, FM, QRP, Mobile/Portable, EME and more. Testers can be heard across our entire spectrum from 160m to 10GHz and up. There are contests that include folks who build their own gear, who own vintage gear, who like to try different antennas and even those who operate from nearby islands (ex – Honeymoon or Sanibel), mountainous summits, National Parks and so much more.

And you can do this casually, testing your skills to build and operate an efficient radio/antenna setup, or you can compete seriously on the world stage of amateur radio. In fact, every 4 years there is a 24-hour long amateur radio International Radiosport contest, Olympics style, that pits the world's best qualified operators in the same location using identical antennas and rules. There are even judges that monitor all their contacts. Like many competitive activities you can play in the casual league, minor leagues or the major leagues. It's all tremendous fun and your main competitor is usually... yourself!

So how do you get started in contesting? If you are like many hams, whether new or experienced, you have already started to like certain activities. This is a good place to start – turning what you enjoy casually into a contesting challenge.

Like VHF/UHF? Set up a VHF/UHF station to operate during Field Day, the June VHF contest, or July CQ VHF contest. Read the rules, start making plans and have fun!

Like to operate HF SSB? Try it out at Field Day, or a State QSO Party (there's a different state QP just about every weekend and each would love to have you join the fun!).

If CW or Digital are your modes, there is plenty of contest fun for you too! Give a few of these a try – Straight Key Night, ARRL Rookie Roundup, CQ World Wide DX, CQ WPX or World Wide Digi DX Contest.

And be sure to check out cwops.org – beginning to advanced CW ops can develop their skills with online classes and weekly operating events that welcomes both members and non-members alike.

10 HELPFUL CONTESTING TIPS:

#1. Find a mentor (“Elmer”) who can guide and encourage you. Many of us are around and very willing to help!

#2. Make sure your station, big or small, works as it should for the bands/modes you want to try contesting.

#3. Read the contest rules – twice! Ask your Elmer about anything you don’t understand.

#4. Prepare for the contest – this can be as much fun as the contest itself. Perhaps setting up a mobile station, adding a new antenna or discussing the best operating strategy with your Elmer.

#5. Find a logging program that works for you and become familiar with it. N1MM+ is very powerful and is free. SD Logger is another freebie. N3FJP logging software is not free but is easy to learn and well supported. Again, an Elmer may be able to help guide you to one that meets your needs.

#6. **Jump in and operate!** Start by listening to other contest stations and see how they exchange calls and their contest information ‘exchange’. This could be a signal report and state, their name, a serial number or their CQ or ITU zone. Notice that good operators don’t hesitate to ask stations to slow down and repeat their info so they make sure to receive and log the Exchange correctly.

Then just follow their lead – tune for a station calling CQ Contest (or CQ test, CQ FQP, CQ FD, etc.) and answer with your call. Listen and log his Exchange and then give yours in return. Voila- Your first Contest QSO!

Are you nervous? **GOOD!** That is the beginning of your adrenaline kicking in for the contest. It happens to all of us at the beginning of every contest.

Then ‘Rinse and Repeat’ – find another Contest CQer to answer, or find an open frequency and call CQ Contest yourself (always ask first if the frequency is in use). Go slow, work on accurate copy.

#7. Mistakes are OK – repeat – OK. Even world class operators make mistakes, we all do. If you don’t copy an operator’s call or exchange, just ask them to repeat it. Just slow down, go at your own pace and ask the other operator to repeat their Exchange info or to slow down. Most contesters need your contact and are very willing to slow down and repeat info you need.

#8. Be sure to log your contacts, either on paper or (hopefully) with electronic logging software. You’ll need that record to submit your contest entry. It really helps contest sponsors to have your log to verify contacts on both ends, even if you’re in a contest casually and not going for score. And, who knows – you might earn a very nice certificate. One contest, the Washington State QSO Party ‘Salmon Run’ offers real Pacific smoked salmon to top entries!

#9. Learning takes practice. Just keep plugging away, have fun and work on sending and receiving the calls and exchanges accurately. Speed will come later as you practice more. Slow and accurate is much better than fast and sloppy operating. Sometimes it helps to imagine if this exchange of information is as if it were Health and Welfare traffic – accuracy wins the day, and your operating skills will improve.

#10. Join the Florida Contest Group (FCG)! We have more than 300 members all across the state and a very active online Group that is a terrific forum to ask questions regarding your station, antennas, operating practices and so much more. You will find an outstanding group of friendly Elmers very happy

to answer your questions, no matter how basic. The only dumb question is the one that is not asked!
We have annual meetings at both the Orlando HamCation and the Melbourne Hamfest. Annual dues are a whopping \$5/year. You can get started by emailing George K5KG at K5KG@K5KG.com
Also, check out our website at <https://floridacontestgroup.org/>

Good Luck (GL) with your new adventures into Radiosport!
Vy 73 (Very Best Regards),
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