

LARG – CONTESTING 101

W4AU and N4PD

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INTRODUCTION

- Why enter a ham radio contest / QSO Party?
 - Good test of your station's capabilities
 - Good way to improve your operating skills
 - Good way to learn how to use your equipment
 - Good way to collect awards: DXCC, WAS, etc.
 - It's a challenge and a lot of fun!

PREPARATION

- Know your station's strengths and weaknesses
- Know how to use your logging program
- Read over the contest rules – keep copy handy
 - Exchange
 - Times and frequencies
 - Categories
- Propagation – make a band plan
- Look over old results
- Be ready when the contest starts

STRATEGY

- Choose contest and category carefully
 - Single band entry if only one good antenna
 - Don't try QRP with poor antennas
- Decide if serious or 'just playing' ahead of time
- Know what band to start on and where to talk

TACTICS

- Search and Pounce
 - Easier, operate at your own pace
 - Can 'sweep' new band fast
 - Multiple chances to get exchange correct
 - Lower overall rate compared to running
 - Not so good for in-state in QSO Parties
 - Can enter 'assisted' category and use spotting

TACTICS, con't

■ Running

- Best consistent rates
- Takes more skill and experience
- Have to be confident of abilities, esp. on CW
- May miss some key mults
- Have to know when to move

OPERATING TIPS - SSB

- Learn to tune in a station quickly and accurately
 - Remember: “Down” on LSB and “up” on USB
- Speak clearly with standard phonetics
- Give complete call once, **NOTHING ELSE**
- Keep voice excited, modulated, and urgent
- Don't rag chew or slow down when rate high
- Keep track of other stations calling
- Use pre-recorded audio judiciously

OPERATING TIPS - SSB

- Lure noncompetitive stations when in QP's
 - “Calling anybody, anywhere...”
 - “Big signal from Wisconsin...”
- First time thru the band give callsign immediately – tailend
- Learn how to find a clear frequency for CQ

OPERATING TIPS - CW

- Set CW speed to at least 20 wpm
- Get the exchange and call from previous QSO
- Call with only callsign; no DE, no /QRP, etc.
- Tune down the band rather than up
 - Need to change CW sideband – ‘reverse’

OPERATING TIPS - CW

- Big Secret: CW contesting is easier than SSB!
 - Can copy when not exactly zero beat on freq.
 - QRM less of a factor; use narrow BP filters
 - Huge improvement in S/N ratio over SSB
 - You can run stations with 100 watts, even mobile

HARDWARE

- It all starts and ends with the antenna
 - Resonant antennas are better
 - “You can hear everything, but you can’t hear anything...” (AI2C)
 - Do the best that you can and then operate
- Radio needs good front end
 - Big contests = stressful listening, esp. on SSB
- Interface radio with logging computer
 - Automatic frequency info and CW sending

HARDWARE - LOGGING

■ Why

- Don't have to worry about dupe sheets
- Send CW messages automatically
- Log ready to submit at the end of contest
- Other: mults, rate, band map, etc.

■ How

- Serial or parallel CW keying
- Serial rig control

FIELD DAY

- Perfect time for learning
 - Many Elmers around to help out – ask questions
 - Different rigs and modes to try
 - Lower stress than a “real” contest
 - Don’t have to spend a long times “in the chair”
- Remember, it’s a domestic contest
- Need to optimize openings to prime targets

QUERIES FROM AI2C

- Do you know what call areas you should be working?
- Can you tune in a sideband signal very quickly?
- Do you ever think you are off frequency?
- Is your receiver sharp enough?
- Does your voice crack the pile-ups?
- Do you work them on no more than two calls?
- Do you move on quickly to the next one?
- Do you listened to your own voice?
- Do you use a foot switch or VOX?
- Do you first S&P on a new band?
- Do you copy the full call the first time?
- Do you move on quickly when they do not respond?

QUERIES FROM AI2C

- Are you aware of your rates?
- Can you find a "hole?"
- Can you 'hold' a frequency?
- How long do you keep trying to work a weak station?
- Does your receiver overload?
- Do you or can you turn down your RF gain?
- Do you or can you adjust your selectivity?
- Are your filters tight enough?
- Do you use headphones?
- Do you follow the prop?
- Are you there when the band opens?
- Do you change bands when it goes dead?

QUERIES FROM AI2C

- What do you do when folks don't hear you?
- Do you know when to "fold them?"
- Is your antenna oriented correctly?
- Do you have a "flat" transmission line?
- Does all your power get radiated?
- Do you monitor your ALC?
- Do you monitor your SWR?
- Do you have a gain antenna?
- Do you point your antenna into the region?
- Can you copy CW at 25 WPM?
- Do you "stay in the chair?"