

Contest Rules for the 21st Century

After 50 years of participation, we've observed that those of us who compete in radiosport/contesting do so for some combination of these reasons.

1. Bettering one's personal skills
2. Contributing to a club or group effort
3. Peer recognition
4. Exploiting resources to maximum advantage
5. Advancing radiosport

We assume that numbers 1, 2 and 3 are what motivate most testers. The highly competitive among us are mostly driven by numbers 1 through 4. Those with altruistic motives are concerned with numbers 2 and 5. When I was inducted into the CQ Contest Hall of Fame, I discovered that the honor was bestowed on me for numbers 2 and 5 and, in part, number 4, and not because of how many contests I'd won.

The reason for this prologue is to review and reopen discussion regarding the current state of contest rules. We believe they are overly restrictive, arbitrary and onerous. At the same time, we continue to add categories, sub-categories and matrices of listings. This proliferation of categories and certificates may help number 3, but it may also be diluting the significance of recognizing winning achievements.

Don't get us wrong. We are delighted that KY7M took the Zone 3 plaque from our station in the 2008 CQ World Wide 160 Meter CW Contest. Because of physics, geography and population, being a Top 10 US contender on Top Band from Nevada is not going to happen, so these kinds of categories and specialized awards make sense, as do demographic score breakdowns. On the other hand, being number 1 in Nevada in the VHF QSO Party on 432 MHz is not a motivational accomplishment.

While contest sponsors continue to add categories and grind out certificates, the rules are in a constant state of revision, changing points of reference from previous years. The usual rationalization for these changes ostensibly is to fix some perceived inequities. This detection-and-prevention mentality has a direct negative effect on numbers 4 and 5. We have been on both sides of this dichotomy. We have been the object of arbitrary rules, and we have helped invent new categories. Let's look at the benefit and the downside of each.

Innovation and a New Category

In the 1960s and 1970s, K5LZO and WA5LES (now K5RC) invented an interlock system for the ARRL November Sweepstakes that became known as "the Octopus." It allowed us to have operators at both radios but only have one signal on the air. Since we were seen as "unfairly" dominating multi-op SS, the rules were changed to outlaw the Octopus.

Was our ingenuity unfair? Did the rule change help or hinder the enthusiasm and creativity of SS participants? Was the playing field more level, or did subsequent technology just create new challenges?

Later, Tom led the initiative to adopt the multi-two category for ARRL DX contests. The point was to provide operators who enjoy the fellowship of multiop but lack the resources to build a large station with an arena to compete with one another. It was the answer to the class of competition in which we could reasonably compete at the NA5R multi-op station.

Inventive station owners who couldn't fully staff a multi-multi, however, saw a new opportunity, and the multi-two category has taken on many more dimensions than originally envisioned. Some embraced the changes. Others denounced them as attempts to "level the playing field." Is there a need for a multi-two category with restrictions on band changes?

We have discovered the hard way that there is no such thing as a level playing field in any aspect of life. Each of us creates our own advantages and disadvantages. Each of us creates our own degree of suc-



Tom Taormina, K5RC



Grady Ferguson, W5FU (ex-NA5R)

cess. For some, the more treacherous the playing field, the greater the challenge. For others, overcoming obstacles to success is their greatest achievement. Chance and timing can be friends or mortal foes, and we are seldom in total control of either. For those who require some form of handicapping system, however, we suggest taking up golf.

A Bright Outlook for Contesting

In order for our suggestions to have direct purpose, we vehemently disagree with those who predict the imminent demise of ham radio and of contesting in particular. At ages 63 and 65 respectively, K5RC and W5FU are currently building another large contest station. We are very much looking forward to massive new contest records being set at the peak of the coming solar cycle. Over the last three years, the number of new licenses issued is up significantly in the US. The hobby did not spiral into a CB-like abyss when the Morse code requirement was removed.

Aside from the usual cycle of contest activity attributable to a lack of propagation, participation in contests has not suffered measurably and may be on the increase. We met a fellow at Dayton Hamvention® in 2007 — a computer devotee who discovered ham radio contesting. He found phone contests to be a new frontier in competitive video gaming. When we spoke, he was mastering CW because, as he explained, he was missing half the fun of contesting.

We believe this is the new archetype for future testers. If sponsors continue to make the rules of radiosport more restrictive and arbitrary, however, the prophets of doom may be the ones who bring about the demise of contesting. Our rationale for a huge investment in equipment and resources is, therefore, objective and based on current positive trends, not on the wrinkled egos of a couple of aging TDXS Rowdies.

At the root of overly restrictive rules are the viewpoints of ham radio traditionalists, who believe that every technology advance is the downfall of our historical values. Tom heard this when he was 13 years old and the first electronic keyer was demonstrated at a radio club meeting. He heard it when the first memory keyer went on the market, when the first computer logging program

became available and upon the introduction of just about every other advance in operating efficiency over the past 50 years. For more than 100 years, hams were the undisputed leaders in communication innovation — until digital noise reduction, bandwidth compression and other needs of cell phone development took over.

While most of us have replaced our boat anchors with more modern equipment, straight key and legacy equipment groups proliferate and grow in popularity, supporting the argument that there is a place in the hobby for every special interest.

More to the point, however, is that the new generation of hams has *always* had digital technology and the Internet in their lives. Many have no knowledge of CW or vacuum tubes and no understanding of radios that lack a computer interface. As has always been the case in the evolution of society, every new generation eventually views the previous generation as out-of-touch relics. This is accurate to the extent that many of us choose not to embrace new technologies and skills.

As the recently appointed Emergency Coordinator for our county, Tom attended EMCOMM West last May and discovered he knew nothing of the current digital communication methods used in emergency communication. These folks spoke a different language, and he nearly resigned his position because of ignorance of technology and procedures.

We have also just had a very satisfying senior moment. The state ARES group is building a 2 meter backbone, in case their VOIP and digital communication systems go down. It will be poetic justice for us to host their “ancient” RF repeaters and remote bases on our towers. Now Tom is voluntarily going through the painful process of being a novice in the emergency protocol of the current technology and of homeland security rules and guidelines, reinforcing our driving value system of “lead, follow or get out of the way.”

Proposal for New Contest Categories

This brings us to our new general contest rule proposals, which follow.

Categories of Entry

Single Operator (SO): One person



These two rotating towers, 120 feet and 190 feet, will be in the air this summer. The 120 footer will support 6/6/6/6 on 15, while the 195 foot tower will support 6/6/6/6 on 10 meters and 3/3 stacked OptiBeams on 80.

performs all operating and logging functions. No more than one signal on the air at any time.

Multi-One (M1): One or more persons perform all operating and logging functions. No more than one signal on the air at any time. Single operators using any form of outside operating assistance (packet, spotting nets etc) during the contest period are considered multi-one.

Multi-Two (M2): More than one person performs all operating and logging functions. No more than two signals on the air at any time but not on the same band.

Multi-Unlimited (MU): More than one person performs all operating and logging functions. No more than one signal on any band at any time. All transmitted RF radiation must occur from within a 1000 meter (3281 feet) radius or on one contiguous parcel of land, all in the same country or multiplier entity (CQ zone, ARRL section etc).

Technology

The use of innovative technology is encouraged in all classes of contest entry. The following defines the current application of technology. Use of remote stations must comply with the restrictions of each entry class.

SO: Any technology that uses only the resources of the single operator during the contest period. Examples include SO2R, SuperCheck Partial, prefills and *CW Skimmer*. Operators can receive logistical help (food, equipment repairs etc) from others, but not operating assistance.

M1, M2: Any additional technology that uses the resources of more than one

operator, such as networked computers, packet clusters and spotting nets.

MU: Any additional technology, such as remote receivers and advanced digital technology. The unlimited category is designed to encourage innovative technology and strategies.

Compliance

Contestants and stations must comply with all applicable laws of their licensing jurisdiction (band segments, power limits etc). Logs must represent actual, real-time operating events and categories (M1 or M2 cannot operate as unlimited and then selectively submit log segments). While it is expected that operators will strive to submit as correct and accurate logs as possible, logs shall not be changed based

on data received *after* the contest period (comparing logs to packet spot data bases, other logs etc). Following the “intent” of all rules and regulations is the basis for compliance adjudication.

Whereas, No More Loopholes

That's it! We submit that all the whereases and wherefores in current rules are unnecessary and overly burdensome, and they stifle creativity. We chose the few constraints that we did include because the problem of remote operation latency is destined to be resolved. One station transmitting from multiple locations and political entities in the same contest presents legal issues we have yet to contemplate, however.

Let's rid ourselves of run and multiplier radios, counting band changes, trying to legislate the use of skimmers and creating obfuscate rules that encourage those who live on the dark side to find loopholes. Instead, let's encourage all contesters to find innovative ways to make contests more enjoyable by pushing the technology envelope and continually advancing our passion.

About the authors: These two former TDXS Rowdies built the NA5R multi-op station destroyed by Hurricane Alicia in 1983. Reunited 20 years later, they are now in the third phase of constructing the N5JJ-K5LZO Memorial Station in Virginia City, Nevada.

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