

Tips for DX Contest Operating

By Mike DeChristopher, K1KAA

This is a list of helpful tips and hints based on my own experience and understanding, as well as the experiences of others. Although this is not a complete guide, it will serve to expose a few strategies most operators will find new. Remember, there is no substitute for practice – so get on the air!

Pre-Contest Checks

1-2 weeks prior to contest start

Always be sure your station is as ready to go as you are. Check the tune on all of your antennas. Check your amplifiers. Listen for key clicks. Then, once everything is just as you want it, keep it that way. Label it, even if you are entering in the single operator class; at 3:00 a.m., things might not be so fresh in your mind. Test logging programs and radio interfaces *often*. Begin to develop an operating plan based on expected conditions and goals.

6 hours prior to contest start

Start the logging program and connect to your telnet or RF cluster nodes (if you use spotting). Have back-up node connections ready; in CQWW and the larger contests, RF connections will often crash. Point the antennas where they should be pointed at the start of the contest, and start listening to conditions. This is a good time to start looking at propagation prediction reports. Begin to finalize your operating plan. If hosting other operators, do any final cleaning and station ergonomic adjustments.

1 hour prior to contest start

Turn on the radios and amplifiers! It is important to let the equipment warm up. Take the time to tune up and down the band. Note the frequencies of any multipliers and add them to your radio's memory. Talk to other contest stations who, at this point, are probably ragchewing just to hold a frequency for the contest start. Collect signal reports. Then, get on a frequency of your own and ragchew, if you plan to start the contest running. Bring a water bottle into the shack for yourself and any other operators you may have.

During the Contest

Opening hours

Work everyone and everything you hear. Go up and down the bands, scanning for multipliers first. Then go back and work the non-multipliers. Once you have emptied the telnet bandmap and worked everyone you can hear, call CQ. If you call longer than about six or seven minutes, change bands to keep a higher rate. Remember the time limit most contests have for band changes. Don't be afraid to pass multipliers to your other stations (if you have them). If you are single op or multi/single, don't be afraid to move with them, especially if the band you want them to move to is faster than your current band. This is an art

that gets easier with practice. A strong effort through the first night is *paramount*. Most “lightweight” contesters (some who are very rare multipliers) will lose interest after the opening hours. You need those points!

Late-night hours

Work through the night as best you can. Remember, 10 and 15 will open to Europe early, so catch a nap when you can. Working 80 and 160 can be lucrative when 40 is not, but when it gets boring, go to sleep. Leave the shack, and get some food when you wake up. Then get ready for the fray of the high bands.

Early-morning hours

Call CQ on 15 and 10 – use your instincts! Make sure you get a frequency just before the opening so the Europeans scanning the band will hear you first. While calling, use your second VFO to search-and-pounce for multipliers. You can listen off the backside for the waning Canadians, but don’t “break the bank” on them. Don’t forget to listen to South America and the Pacific, who should become louder as the day progresses (in most cases). Spin the beam around to different headings when the rate slows down, but if it gets too slow, go down a band. Keep an eye on the Maximum Useable Frequency (MUF); operate as close to it as possible, without going above.

End of the contest

The end of the contest usually descends into a frantic search for a few last needed multipliers, and this is fine. Just be smart about it. Don’t call endlessly, unless you have your second VFO searching for multipliers. Keep looking at the bandmap, and change bands to situate yourself better to that part of the world. Times like these make it important to know which countries have privileges on a certain band and, if so, where on the band those privileges may be. You can catch extra multipliers “on the river” if you are smart and don’t fall into the rookie trap of the last-minute sprint.

Post-Contest

Just afterwards

Turn everything off and step away. Have some food, lie on the couch, and go to bed – you deserve the rest. Don’t rush around to submit your results just yet; you have plenty of time and your brain needs a break. It is also not wise to amend the log yet; it is better to have a clear state of mind before you change anything.

One week later

When things have calmed down, take a decent amount of time to go through the log and do your post-checks. Once you are satisfied, make the submissions. I take this opportunity to talk with operators about *next* year. If you operated single op, write down helpful notes for next year; things to improve on, stations improvements, or even dietary alterations for the future. Do these things now that they are fresh in your mind. ■

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