

Future Trends in Contesting
by Tod Olson, KOTO

(March - April 1979)

(This article was presented at the first ever Contest Forum held at the Dayton Hamfest; April 1975.)

It is always presumptuous for one person to stand before a group of people talking about matters with which they are familiar, stating that he is going to tell them what they are going to do. The speaker's problem is how to say something credible and yet make any sort of predictions at all.

Stations Receivers and Transmitters

Good contest receivers are harder to find than good contest transmitters. Serious contest ops go through new receivers like popcorn. Still, the choices seem related to geography as much as money. Collins, Drake and Heath remain the prime choices with the Collins' dynamic range and general handling characteristics making it a primary choice. The 160M band and the transceiver and separate options of the Drake make it a good second choice. Our purpose here is not to evaluate receivers for contesting so I will not continue the comparisons. The point is that the general choice of receivers tends to dictate the choice of transmitters. This in turn leads to a small difference in the size of the illegal power amplifiers used by some serious operators, otherwise we all tend to use a KW.

Station Antennas

There is a rich variety of antennas employed by contest operators. Still, if we remove from consideration the extraordinary equipment of stations like W7RM, W2PV, W3AU, K4GSU, etc., we find amazing similarities between stations. Mono band yagis on 20-15-10 with four elements; two element shortened beams on 40; dipoles on 80 (maybe you call them inverted vee's).

Naturally this is a crude slice across the variety of contest entries; yet clearly three classes emerge. Those stations with stacked arrays and full size 40 meter beams, etc.; those stations with good, directive antennas on every band but 80; and those who use tribanders, dipoles, verticles, etc. The trend is toward elaborate antennas, even for modest stations.

Electromechanical Operating Aids

At one point I was thinking of discussing "avant-garde" applications for single chip microprocessors in a contest station. I decided, "the hell with that, no one would believe me;" so, -- maybe next year. We have gone from straight key to bug to keyer to memory keyer. We have tape loops and Comdels and Magnums and power meters and break-in and VOX. It was reported that W6PAA had so many footswitches to control his

station that once in his chair he was reluctant to get out for fear of forgetting what did what. If we all have the same equipment and roughly the same antennas for our particular class, then here is one of the places where the creative guy can establish a point of difference. Whatever happens, we can expect a lot of innovative ideas for improving contest scores.

Station "Q"

I have coined this catchy phrase to cover the overall effectiveness of a station. The "figure of merit" if you please. Stations are simply getting better all the time and in turn they cost more to assemble. In spite of the expense, we can anticipate that this trend will continue -- helped along in equal measure by technology and affluence.

Operating Skill

Those young kids are disgustingly good. Admittedly, the over 30 (W6OAT, W6RR, WOHP, LU5HFI, etc.) are still winning some contests, but the WB6OLD's, WB0DJY's, K7VPF's are coming on strong. Overall, the level of operating skill is increasing each year and will continue to increase.

Guest Operators

The operating skill of some contestants is increasing faster than their resources to assemble station hardware. The operating skill and interest of some contest ops is declining and their established stations are considerably more able than they are. Still, the old ego is there and they want to push their station call up in the listings. So, an arrangement is made by two consenting hams and a joint venture or team entry is created. This is much the same as the organization for an automobile racing team. Sponsors, mechanics, drivers, etc. form a group -- each doing what he does best -- and together they field an entry. A few driver-builders remain, but big time racing is dominated by the team, and the driver is a very knowledgeable "appliance operator." So, too, is the fate of big time radio competition. W6MAR, WB2OEU, K7NHV, and a few others may hold out for a while, but long term it will be the team entries at the top of the final results.

Number of Entrants

Each year more people participate in the ARRL SS. Still, the national winners are forced to start hustling contacts sometime Sunday afternoon. Depending upon the way in which contests are run in the future, numbers of entrants in the domestic contests will probably increase -- perhaps quite rapidly. DX contests are becoming more clearly than ever a special event held for the coastal fringe of the country. Things being what they are, the total number of entries will probably drop, although activity from multi-singles and multi-multis will continue relatively high. Still, overall, DX contests will probably grow little, if any, over the next 15 to 20 years.

Number of Contests

Simply put, there are too damn many contests. We suffer from the same over stimulation as the frog leg muscle we applied shocks to in biology. The only cure is collaboration by the amateur magazines to refuse space to all except "sanctioned" contests. The sanctioned contest would have to be one that was approved by some "overlord" group which could exercise discipline in scheduling, rules, awards, etc. I think this may come -- but only if enough discussion on the subject occurs and a few people carefully think out the way such a group would function and then persuade others that it would be a good innovation for contesting.

Somehow, we should address the complaint that every weekend there is a contest and mobs of professional QRM makers run wild. (They do forget that we can copy through the QRM even if they cannot.) Still, the image of the contest op should be one of "Ham Magna Cum Laude" no matter what his license class. Long term, the proliferation of contests will diminish and perhaps sanctioned contests will appear.

Sunspots

There seems to be less uncertainty about how bad it will be on the sun's surface over the next 20 years than most other things in ham radio. The lows will be lower and the highs will be lower, too. DXing will take real smash to make a go of things. The thrilling report from W7RM of working only five stations per hour during parts of the last ARRL DX test suggests that DX contests are going to be a drag in the years to come. Efforts are being, and will continue to be, expended to improve signals -- coming and going -- on 160, 80 and 40. Since the mind bogs after 35 hours when the adrenalin drops because the rate drops -- we should find that domestic contests with much longer high activity periods will be increasingly popular.

Single band contests and other ploys will be developed to maintain interest. The trend will be to create new contests and modify or delete old ones so as to maximize enjoyment with the propagation on hand.

Summary

Lumping all of these ideas together, we get the general impression that scores will go up, stations will be better and more expensive, contest teams will dominate, contesting will be more popular than ever, and the sunspot cycle will accentuate the use of the lower frequency bands for contests.

[The article goes on to propose a rating system for operators and stations to allow competition between three competitive classes.]

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