

The Wide World of Radiosport

If you've ever been tuning around the ham radio bands on a weekend and heard some urgent-sounding transmissions saying "CQ contest, CQ contest," then you've stumbled across one of the many competitive on-air events that may be going on at any given time. Competitive ham radio, also known as *radiosport* or *contesting* (with the accent on the first syllable), is a popular sub-hobby within ham radio. The pace of contests is usually fast and exhilarating. For participants who are hitting the event hard, an on-air contest can require as much stamina, technique, and strategy as other, more traditional sports, but even hams who describe themselves as "casual testers" agree that a less-intense venture into a contest can be fun and rewarding. Here's a little more about the fascinating world of competitive radio.

An on-air contest generally involves individuals or teams of radio amateurs trying to make contact with as many other stations as possible over a specified period. A contest can be short, lasting only a few hours (these are sometimes called *sprints*), or it can be a longer event that lasts 24 to 48 hours. Contests are sponsored by IARU societies like ARRL, as well as by ham radio clubs or organizations. This leads to there being a variety of contest opportunities available. In fact, you can usually find some kind of contest activity — whether it's a longer contest or QSO party, or a shorter sprint-type event — pretty much any week of the year. A couple of good places to find information about contests are the

ARRL Contest Calendar at arrl.org/contest-calendar and the WA7BNM Contest Calendar at contestcalendar.com.

These websites will provide you with a list of events, as well as links to the rules for specific contests.



Radiosport is For Everyone

You don't have to have an elaborate station or be able to put in an entire weekend of operating time in order to have fun with radiosport. Even if you are a casual operator, the more serious players need every contact they can get, so get on the air and make some contacts. Many hams like the challenge of trying to beat their score from the previous year, or establish a new personal best in terms of time on the air, or number of contacts made in 1 hour. There are many approaches to radiosport, and all of them can be fun!



The Rules of the Game

Each contest has its own set of rules that define the contest objectives, so it's important to read the rules before jumping into a contest. The rules let you know which amateur bands you can use for the event (some contests, like ARRL's 160-Meter Contest, which is December 3-5 this year, and ARRL's 10-Meter Contest, which is December 11-12 this year, focus on only one band, while other contests will specify the use of several bands), as well as what mode or modes. Some contests are limited to a single mode (such as ARRL Sweepstakes Phone and ARRL Sweepstakes CW) — while others allow the use of multiple modes.

A contest's rules include information about time — not only the start and stop times of the contest, but also any time limits (some contests, like ARRL Sweepstakes, require you to take breaks from operating), the maximum amount of power allowed, whether it's okay to use *spotting* tools (such as websites like dxsummit.fi, where stations that are currently on the air are listed, or *spotted*), where to send your log for checking and scoring, and more.

The rules will also give details about the all-important *exchange* — the information that one station must give to another in order for the contact to be considered complete.



Making the Exchange

Exchange information varies from contest to contest. An exchange can include several pieces of information, which can include your name, a sequential serial number, things pertaining to your location (state, province, ARRL Section, geographic zone, Maidenhead grid locator), or other elements.

Let's look at a typical contest exchange. In this example, W1AW is soliciting contacts in a contest where the exchange is a signal report and the station's ARRL Section. W1AW is in Connecticut and W3VRX is in Eastern Pennsylvania. Here is how the exchange would sound when using voice mode:

"CQ contest, Whiskey One Alpha Whiskey, contest."
(W1AW is calling CQ, soliciting contacts in the contest.)

"Whiskey Three Victor Romeo X-ray" (W3VRX responds to W1AW's CQ by sending his call sign once, phonetically. No other information is required.)

"Whiskey Three Victor Romeo X-ray, Five Nine, Connecticut." (W1AW sends W3VRX the contest exchange — the signal report "Five Nine," and their ARRL Section, which is Connecticut. W1AW could also have given their Section as "CT," saying "Charlie Tango" in phonetics.)

"QSL. Five Nine, Echo Papa Alpha." (W3VRX confirms receipt by saying "QSL," and sends his exchange — the signal report "Five Nine," and his ARRL Section, which is EPA, or "Echo Papa Alpha" in phonetics.)

"73. Whiskey One Alpha Whiskey, QRZ?" (W1AW confirms W3VRX's exchange by saying "73," and says "QRZ" [pronounced "cue arr zed"] to indicate that they are now listening for new stations.)

As you can see, the communications are brief and to the point, and free from unnecessary verbiage like “Please copy Charlie Tango” or “This is W3VRX.” In a contest, participants are racing to see who can make the most contacts, so it’s important to be economical. Also, it is best to stick with the standard phonetic alphabet — making up your own phonetics can be confusing to others, leading them to ask you to repeat your exchange, which takes up valuable time.

It’s important for both stations in a contact to copy the exchange correctly. If some of the information is missed or logged incorrectly, it can affect your score.



Teaming Up or Going It Alone

Many hams participate in contests on their own, as a *single operator*, which means they perform all the operating and logging functions themselves. It’s also possible to participate in contests as part of a *multioperator* team, which can range from just two operators to a couple of dozen operators who work in shifts. Single operators and teams may enter a contest in one of several categories, based on their transmitted power and whether they are assisted by operating aids. Ham radio clubs with an interest in contesting will often participate as a club, combining the scores from individual club members and teams of club



members to arrive at an aggregate score for the club. To keep things on a level playing field, clubs are categorized by size.

Keeping Score

After a contest, participants upload their logs to the sponsor’s website. Most events require that logs are sent within 7 days, but this can vary, so check the contest’s rules. If you use logging software, this eliminates the need to check for duplicate contacts or calculate your score. The software will do this for you, so you can export the log file and upload it to the sponsor’s web portal or email. Contest sponsors also use software to score the results. Most contests have different categories, so awards (which are often in the form of plaques and certificates) may be issued based on an entrant’s category and geographic region. There’s no requirement to submit your log, however. It’s perfectly fine to jump into a contest and make a few contacts just for fun. After all, fun is what radiosport is all about!



Hamspeak: Radiosport Terms

Qs

QSOs, contacts made in a contest.

QSOs

Contacts made in a contest. Pronounced “cue-sews.”

QSO Points

A point value assigned to contacts in a contest. Depending on the contest, some contacts could have a higher point value.

Mults

Short for *multipliers*.

Multiplier contacts are added up, then multiplied by your total points to achieve a score.

Score

Total QSO points, times total multipliers, plus any bonus points.

Dupes

Duplicate contacts.

In a contest, a station may only be contacted once, so a duplicate contact does not count.

Unique

A legitimate call sign in your log that does not appear in any other log submitted in the event. Participants are generally not penalized for these contacts, however, a log heavy with unique calls will attract scrutiny from the judges.

Busted Call

A call sign that was not copied correctly.

Participants are generally penalized for these contacts.

NIL

Not In Log. This is a call sign that’s in your log, but that does not appear in the log of your QSO partner.

Participants are generally penalized for these contacts.

Rate

The number of QSOs made in a period.