

Contesting Do's and Don'ts

by members of the Florida Contest Group



To someone just starting out, contesting can seem to be the ultimate insider's sport. Contesters who are at the top of the standings over and over always seem to be in the right place at the right time, and seem to find band openings that mere mortals can only dream of. More importantly, they seldom make the big mistakes that sometimes sink their competitors.

A number of years ago, some of the experienced and accomplished members of the Florida Contest Group distilled their decades of experience into a list of do's and don'ts that would help all contesters position themselves for success before, during, and after a contest. Even if you apply just one tip out of dozens to your next contest operation, we think it will help your score. Good luck!

— W4WF, K5KG, K1TO, K8NZ, K4XS

Planning Ahead

- Do any necessary antenna work as far in advance as possible.
- Think about your contest strategy in advance.
- Decide on your category.
- Select your power level. Remember to check whether if the contest rules include a power multiplier for QRP or LP, and whether your power level is compatible with your category.
- Select and update logging software, and test the interface with your transceiver.
- Record and test CW, RTTY, and/or SSB messages in advance.
- Ensure your signal is clean — no key clicks or SSB splatter. Ask a friend to evaluate your signal on the air if needed.

- If you're multi-op, set up and test your logging network.
- Set your goals — personal best? Top 10? 500+ QSOs?
- Prepare snacks, meals, and drinks in advance.
- Consider your sleep schedule in advance and set an alarm clock (before the contest starts!).
- Know the log submission deadline.
- If possible, be active on the air for a few days before the contest; try to get a feel for propagation and activity.
- Check NG3K.com and *The Daily DX* for activity from rare multipliers (in a DX contest). Keep the list handy during the contest.

During the Contest

- Start on time — don't give up operating time at the beginning!
- Send your full call when calling another station — no partials or last-two.
- Avoid time-wasting fillers, but remain approachable and friendly-sounding.
- If the rates drop, turn your keyer speed down. On phone, use your "friendly voice."
- Don't be a packet rat. Verify calls from the cluster and RBN.
- Use your software's Note function to record notes about any questionable QSOs.
- Work dupes — arguing about dupes wastes time.
- If you're operating from a DX location and you start to get a string of 6–10 dupes, you've been spotted incorrectly. Your best choice is often to find a new frequency (thanks W2OX/V47KP).

- Tune in the direction of the sideband — tune up the band on USB, tune down the band for LSB.

After the Contest

- Save your log to your logging computer, and back it up to a flash drive or elsewhere.
- Turn off your rig and disconnect your antennas.
- Check your Notes file and resolve any issues noted during the contest.
- Report your score to 3830scores.com.
- Submit your Cabrillo file to the contest sponsor before the deadline.
- Let your family know that you're alive and well!

Tips Applicable to All Contests

- Read the rules *before the contest!* Not only will it help you determine your entry category, you may find special band segments and other unusual rules that are not immediately obvious. You may even find that the rules have changed from the last time!
- If your goal is to win your category or Section/state, look over the previous year's results.
- Establish a goal for your effort, whether it's beating your buddy, beating your score from last year, working a few new ones, or just operating for as long as it's fun.
- Be honest with yourself about your station's strengths and weaknesses, and spend more time on bands and modes that play to those strengths.
- Know your radio's functions and how to use them. There are few things more satisfying than getting the first QSO after a rare multiplier goes split



Position yourself for contesting success with the help of the tips in this article.

HENRYK KOTOWSKI, SM0JHF

- because you know how to set your second VFO without fumbling.
- If your radio has a second receiver, try using the second RX to search and pounce more efficiently. Start at the bottom of the band with one RX and the top of the band with the other. It may seem awkward at first, but you'll soon be doubling your S&P rate.
- Try to think outside the box. To avoid the Sunday doldrums in Sweepstakes, K8MR operates from 3–4 different stations with different call signs. He's always "fresh meat," and often his combined scores exceed the winning SO score.

- Invite someone to operate your station if you can't get on, or organize a multi-op entry. Hosting and multi-ops are great opportunities to teach or learn contesting skills while enjoying the fellowship of like-minded contesters.
- When Planning a Part-Time Entry**
- Consider the bands, modes, and operating times that will allow for the most fun.
- Consider using packet/RBN unless you're philosophically opposed, but as the saying goes, "trust, but verify" those packet spots!

Tips for Low-Power Entries

- Choose your CQ frequency carefully. First, send "QRL?" to make sure the frequency isn't occupied. Don't open up with 100 W next to someone running high power and large antennas; you'll have a tough time getting traction.
- A few minutes calling CQ costs little and there is much to be gained. In most contests, the number of operators who are tuning the band at any given time far exceeds the number who are calling CQ. If you find a spot, jump in!