

Operating Mechanics: The X-Factor in Contesting Success

Patrick Barkey, N9RV

The Lesson of the Howie Meeker Hockey School



The Lesson of the Howie Meeker Hockey School

- Do you know how to play hockey?
- Sure, you skate around on the ice and slap at pucks
- But can you:
 - find skates that fit
 - skate with power
 - put your weight into your shot
 - pass to a moving player
 - change direction and cross over

- Do you know how to operate contests?
- Sure, you load up your software and answer and run guys
- But can you:
 - copy calls correctly
 - answer a question
 - ask for a repeat
 - deal with an interloper
 - handle a zero beat pileup
 - get through a pileup
 - control your frequency

NTS in 1969: Contest Camp?

- Copy it right – no repeats
- Learn how to ask for a fill
- Listen and respond to instructions
- Send CW



Boot Camp for CW Contesters

- Send “Mississippi.” (No QRS)
- Ask NO3M to QSY to 10 meters.
- Respond to N2NT when he asks for a fill on your Check (after you mashed your 2nd radio CQ button
- Operate the CW Sprint.

Actual Quotes Heard During Multi-Op Contests*

- “ ... the band is really hot. Let’s tune for a while.”
- “ ... wow, that was the first 60 hour I’ve ever had.”
- “There’s too many of you calling at once. QRZed”
- “Who reset my keyer memories with all these short CQs?”

* Not at K3LR

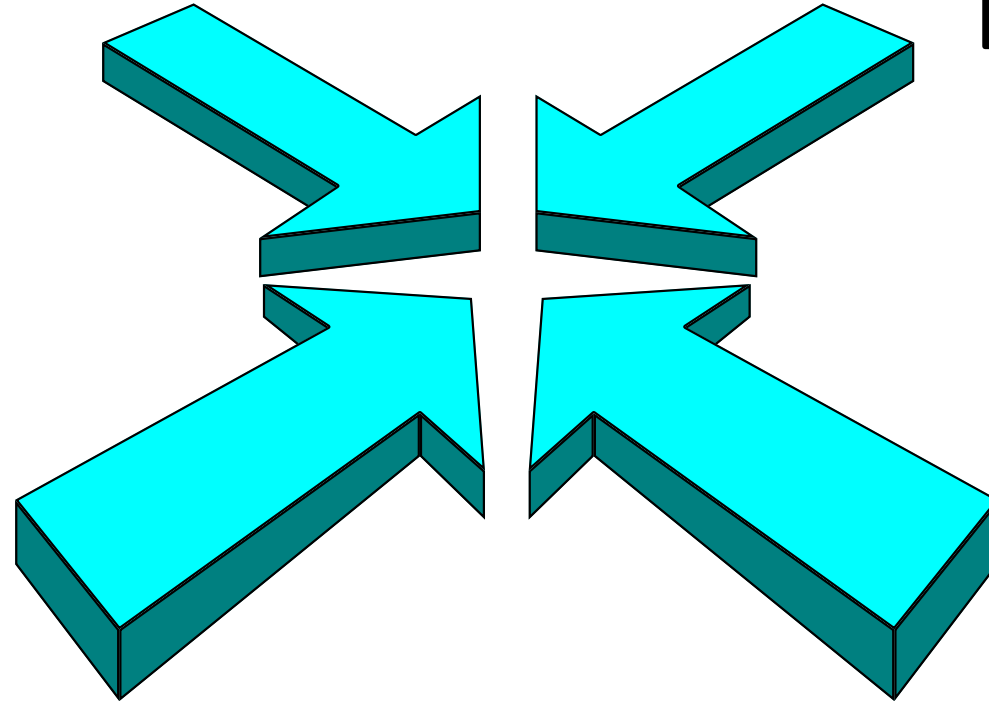
Keys to Contest Success

Preparation

**Strategy and
Decisions**

Propagation

**Operating
Ability**



**Operating:
Can it be
taught?**

- No, it can only be “absorbed.”
- Yes, but if I teach you I will have to kill you.
- Yes, but the lessons can only be learned through experience.

**Many
Contesters
Don't Want to
Learn!**

- Operating is personal. Egos are fragile.
- Stubborn personalities abound (“This is how I’ve always done it”).
- Some of us cling to “facts” that don’t pan out. (“You need to call slower CQs to work more guys”)

“Natural” Operating Ability

- Hearing
- Reaction time
- CW sending/receiving
- Coordination
- Enunciation
- Typing Ability

But there is
technology
that can help
compensate:

- Computer / memory keyers
- Call sign databases
- Filters and directional antennas
- Digital Voice Keyers
- Morse Runner

The Logic of Contest Operating

Maximize Score



Maximize Speed



Maximize Efficiency

The Basics of Running Stations

- What you nominally communicate:
Callsigns and exchanges
- What you really want to communicate:
Frequency control

Do's and Don't's of Frequency Control

- Complete callsigns
- Establish rhythm
- Be professional
- No “dead time”
- Respond to the flow of rate

- Long pauses before response
- Needless repeat of information
- Cursing competition or chatting with friends
- Out of synch

Different Paces of a Contest

- Exploratory / Beacon
- Open for Business
- Normal / Fast
- Turbo / Burst

How to Run Faster Rate

- Be prepared for content
- Recognize and respond to complete callsigns
- Transmit only as necessary
- Know when to dig

Prepare
yourself to
copy

- Focus attention at end of each CQ
- Hands on the keyboard
- RIT cleared
- Filters wide

Capturing complete callsigns

- The importance of getting complete, accurate data the first time
- Master the mechanical skills first
- Learn to type
- Learn to send
- Learn to use your contest software to respond with no delay

The mental side of copying calls

- Using your brain as a time-delay filter
- Know what to expect
- Assess and adjust to overcome your limitations
- Use every crutch and gimmick you can

Tightening up your act

- Dead time will kill you
- Learn a way to cut it out or your competition will eat you alive
- Possibilities include:
 - Keep a hand on the paddle
 - Learn to use your software
 - Responding to sounds, not calls

Cutting out the fluff

- You are working the next person in line, not the station you're logging
- Every transmission has a purpose
- The most effective way to handle an interloper is to work people

Improving your operating mechanics

- Make it a priority
- Get on the air
- Listen to the great ones
- Join a serious multi-op effort
- Evaluate yourself frequently

Criteria For Evaluating Your Operating Techniques

- Accuracy
- Efficiency
- Frequency Control
- Ethics

Plenty of Bad Habits to Imitate

- “TU”
- “The timing was right”
- Believing the database
- Deer in the headlights
- Believing the spot
- F4 mashing
- Failing to confirm
- Losing control

Plenty of Bad Habits to Imitate

- “TU” ←—————
- “The timing was right”
- Believing the database
- Deer in the headlights
- Believing the spot
- F4 mashing
- Failing to confirm
- Losing control

“What’s wrong with saying thank you?”

Not signing your call when you are QRZ is a fool’s savings.

Frustrates your pileup

Out of synch

Produces errors in other’s logs

Not in the spirit of the contest

When should you do it?

NEVER!!!

Plenty of Bad Habits to Imitate

- “TU”
- “The timing was right”
- Believing the database
- Deer in the headlights
- Believing the spot
- **F4 mashing** ←————
- Failing to confirm
- Losing control

“Not sure who he came back to?”
Hit F4 (sends your call).

“Hey, I’ve got a ‘V’ in my call!” F4

“I really need this guy.” F4

“My F4 key sends my call *twice*.”

Sadly, this often works

When everyone does it, it slows
rate to a crawl.

Your reputation will suffer

Plenty of Bad Habits to Imitate

- “TU”
- “The timing was right”
- Believing the database
- Deer in the headlights
- Believing the spot
- F4 mashing
- Failing to confirm
- Losing control



We have all done this:

You call in an ugly pile. You hear the guy clearly coming back: “599 34.” Oh boy!

But did he come back to you?

Do not, repeat not, send a report.
Send your call again, send “AGN”,
or just wait.

If he is really calling you, he will
repeat his exchange. If not, you
have avoided a NIL.

Plenty of Bad Habits to Imitate

- “TU”
- “The timing was right”
- Believing the database ←
- Deer in the headlights
- Believing the spot
- F4 mashing
- Failing to confirm
- Losing control

Phone SS True Story:

“... N9 Radio Victor, Check Six Seven, Montana.”

“Are you sure you’re in Montana? My database says Indiana.”

“Well, the view out my window says I’m in Montana.”

Do you believe your database *this* much?

Plenty of Bad Habits to Imitate

- “TU”
- “The timing was right”
- Believing the database
- **Deer in the headlights** ←
- Believing the spot
- F4 mashing
- Failing to confirm
- Losing control

Often hear this in state QSO parties or even CW SS from casual contesters.

Lack of response – dead time.

Can occur for many reasons. Software glitch. Spilt your coffee. But most often because something the other guy sent was not understood.

Whatever the reason, the effect on rate is the same: disaster.

Send something! Even a question mark is better than silence.

Plenty of Bad Habits to Imitate

- “TU”
- “The timing was right”
- Believing the database
- Deer in the headlights
- Believing the spot
- F4 mashing
- **Failing to confirm** ←
- Losing control

If you bust someone’s call and they give you the correction, you must send the correction back to them.

You are not “saving time” by omitting this step. You are risking a NIL because they might not log you.

**See how many
operating
mistakes you can
find in this clip!**



What About SSB Contesting?

**SSB is easier,
right?**



A Few Comments on SSB Mechanics

- SSB is different than CW because you can communicate a tone as well as information
- Friendly, firm, professional
- Rhythm, efficiency just as important as CW
- SSB contesting also draws you into more conflict than CW
- Work people! You don't get points for cursing the competition.
- The art of frequency maintenance (or the decision of whether to try)