Getting the Most Out of Your HF Contest Operations

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You don't have to be a die-hard contester with a powerhouse station to participate in or enjoy amateur radio contesting. All hams, regardless of their experience or station setup, can participate, including those with stations running barefoot 100 W radios with modest wire antennas.

I earned my Technician-class license in 1994 and upgraded to my General class in 2017, eventually earning my Amateur Extra-class license in 2018. After upgrading, I bought an entry-level HF radio and hung a temporary 20-meter antenna. The thrill of HF operating opened me up to a whole new world of ham radio. I never thought that I'd chase awards, but suddenly, I was obsessively counting new states and countries I had contacted.

Setting Contest Operating Goals

The SSB portion of the 2017 ARRL November Sweepstakes was happening shortly after I upgraded, so I decided to participate and make a few contacts to add to my Worked All States (WAS) award. I made 26 contacts using a 100 W transceiver and a 20-meter dipole and ended up netting 11 new confirmations toward my WAS award. I didn't spend a great deal of time operating in that contest, but I achieved my goal of adding to my WAS award totals, deeming my contest effort a success.

While Sweepstakes is a great opportunity to contact new states and Canadian stations, other events, like ARRL DX, the CQ World Wide DX Contest, and the CQ WPX Contest, are also great events to participate in to add to your DXCC country totals. After my moderate success in operating Sweepstakes, I tried my hand at the 2018 ARRL DX SSB, CQ WPX SSB, and CQ World Wide SSB contests. There

are plenty of DX contacts to be made in all of these events. I was able to add 30 new countries to my DXCC totals by participating in these three contests alone! I was hooked — this contesting thing really took hold of me.

It's helpful to determine what your goals are when planning your contest operations. Start by figuring out what you want to accomplish, such as adding to your DXCC or WAS totals, chasing a *Clean Sweep* (contacting at least one station in every ARRL and RAC Section) in ARRL Sweepstakes, or making a certain number of contacts. Maybe your local contesting club has their own competition among its members, and you'd like to improve your standing within the club, or even just beat your personal best score in a particular event.

Maximizing Your Station Setup

As I became more comfortable with contesting, I changed my goal to making at least 100 contacts in major contests. Because my focus had switched from contacting new states and DXCC entities, I realized that I not only needed to improve my contesting skills, but I needed to improve my station setup, as well.

I began by upgrading my antenna system to include 10, 15, and 40 meters, and I purchased a radio that was better suited for contesting. The radio has much better filtering, which is necessary in major contests, due to the closely spaced signals on the bands.
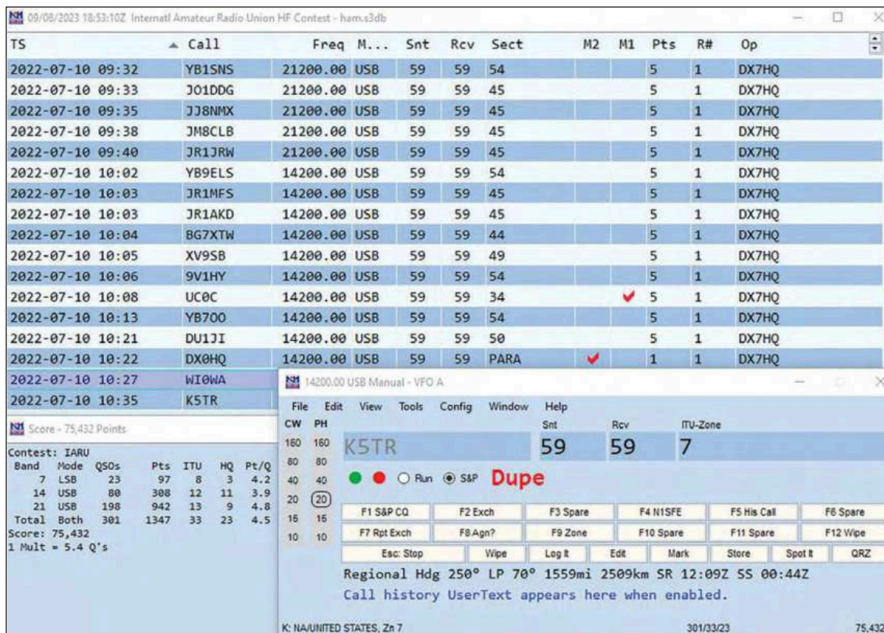
Additionally, the new radio also has built-in USB connectivity, which makes it simpler to interface with contest logging software. Using contest logging software (see Table 1) as opposed to a general logging program not only makes logging more efficient, but it also helps you avoid making duplicate contacts by informing you when you've contacted a particular station already.

I also moved my operating location from my home office to a dedicated ham shack in my basement. Moving to a quieter location that's relatively free from distractions made a big difference with my contest operations. A more spacious location also reduces operating fatigue. Being able to easily locate my radio controls, computer monitor, keyboard, and mouse allows me to operate for longer periods of time, thereby increasing the number of contacts I can make during a contest.

TABLE 1

SOME POPULAR CONTEST LOGGING SOFTWARE

Software (* = free)	Website
N1MM Logger+*	https://n1mmwp.hamdocs.com
N3FJP	www.n3fjp.com/index.html
WriteLog	https://writelog.com
TR4W (TRlog4Windows)*	https://tr4w.net
DXLog.net*	http://dxlog.net
Win-Test	www.win-test.com

Using contesting logging software, such as *N1MM Logger+*, allows for more efficient logging.

The new band additions have changed my contest strategies in multiband contests. Instead of operating on a closed band, I now have the ability to switch to a band that's open. It pays off to keep on top of propagation patterns, as they vary throughout the contest, and sometimes can change rather quickly.

I had gone into the 2022 CQ WPX SSB Contest thinking that with a modest effort I could meet my goal of making 100 contacts, but it didn't take long for me to surpass that goal. The adrenaline was flowing, and by the end of the contest I had 300 contacts in my log! The improvements I made to my station had paid off — I was able to spend more time operating, and I had beaten my personal best score.

Log Submissions and Certificates

After participating in a contest, you should always submit your log to the contest sponsor, no matter how many contacts you made. You might be pleasantly surprised by how well you did. You might even earn a certificate — or a plaque if the sponsor offers them — that you can proudly display. Check the contest sponsors' websites to see if plaques are available, and if one is sponsored by a club or individual for your entry category. You just might end up with a little hardware for your shack wall!

Many contest sponsors accept logs in the Cabrillo log format, which is specifically designed for contest log submissions. Most contest logging software packages have the ability to export the log in the correct format. Be sure to save the log somewhere that enables you to find it again (I have a folder named "Contest Logs" on my desktop). Also, visit the contest sponsors' websites to find out how to submit your log and when the submission deadline is.

I also find it helpful to submit my score to **www.3830scores.com**, where contest participants can upload their *claimed scores* (a participant's scores before a con-

test sponsor performs any log checking, resulting in possible score reductions). Not only can I track my own progress in the contests over time, but I can also read comments made by other participants, which may help me develop better contesting strategies going forward.

Once the log checking is completed by the contest sponsor and the results are released, you'll receive your log-checking report, which will list any score reductions that may have been assessed due to logging errors (erroneously copied call signs, logging incorrect exchange information, etc.). You'll quickly see what your most common mistakes were so that you can correct them in future contests.

Be In the Know About Upcoming Contests

No matter what your station setup is, what your contesting goals are, or if you're a beginner or advanced contester, there are plenty of contests each month for you to participate in. Find one that suits your goals, visit the sponsors' websites, and familiarize yourself with the rules for each event. The contest listing in this supplement includes several major contests. For more contest listings, check out "Contest Corral" in *QST* each month, as well as Bruce Horn's, WA7BNM, Contest Calendar at **www.contestcalendar.com**. The *ARRL Contest Update* is published twice a month, and includes timely information for the active and casual contester. ARRL members can receive this newsletter via email at no charge by subscribing at **www.arrl.org/the-arrl-contest-update**.

Uploading your claimed scores to www.3830scores.com allows you to track your progress operating in contests over time and learn contesting strategies from other participants.