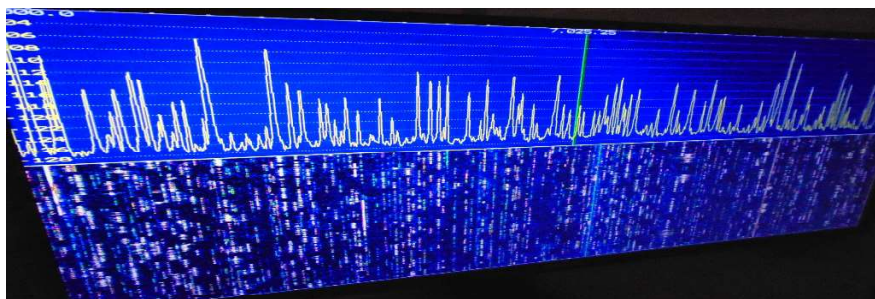


USING CONTESTS TO BUILD YOUR CW SKILLS

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Contests are one of the best ways to build your CW skills. This does not mean you have to be a “contester”. Just the term “contesting” scares many away from this valuable skill building tool. If you are a contester, trying to build your skills, or want to become a contester, so much the better. If, however, you want to build skills, while working new DX countries or states, but don’t care about any score, that’s also a win, win for you.

This paper will address contests from the angle of building skills and not, necessarily creating high scores. It will also assume that, for the most part, the operator is Search and Pouncing and not running (CQing). Beware however, working in a contest can be addictive!

What kind of skills will this exercise enhance? It will expose you to CW that may well be faster than your used to copying. This will help your brain get used to hearing those “machine gun” dits and without you knowing it, it will start decoding them much more easily. You may have to listen over and over to a call sign or exchange to copy it correctly, but that operator is sending much the same thing every time and what better way to practice. Most of them are sending machine code (from a computer), so the code is perfect for the most part. Another plus for you. You will find that after a while, you’re copying much better than you thought you could. Don’t over do it by practicing to long. Notice I said practicing and not contesting! Take breaks when you feel your copy is falling off. There is plenty of time in most of the contests to have many practice sessions.

Hand sending will help immensely in building your wrist’s muscle memory. Sending your call and a simple exchange is not hard, AND, you don’t necessarily need to match the speed of the operator CQing. You need to send at a speed you are comfortable with. It should be at the upper end of your capability. Practice several days before and find out what speed you are capable of sending with good accuracy. Of course, there are always macros that can be used but realize they will not help your sending skills and if used over time, will degrade what you have already achieved in speed.

At first, YOU and not your brain, may become frustrated. You want to copy everything the first time and when that doesn't happen, YOU are frustrated. As always, frustration is the ENEMY. Another skill you will learn, is to control that frustration and forge ahead with this, on the air, real life, CW practice. You need to build on this skill. You will always run in to QRM. QRN, QSB and all kinds of interference to your ability to copy code. Work with your brain to control any frustration you may have. When we were learning at the beginning, we were told to STOP when we were frustrated and practice at another time. Now, that we have more experience, we may be in conditions on the air where we can't stop. We learn to deal with these obstacles, many of which are not our fault.

Let's take a look at some Search and Pounce practices that may help you deal with the contest environment.

Read the rules of the contest. You can see a list of contests and the sponsors' webpage at:

<https://www.contestcalendar.com/>

Pay particular attention to who and what bands/modes where you can work other operators. Know what the exchange consists of. If you want to turn in a score, this is where you will find out how to do the submission to the sponsor.

Listen, listen and listen again to the call sign and exchange before calling so you have all the information prior to trying to make the Q. This will take the stress off of you during the process of making the contact.

Start by calling the station ONE time and no more than twice if he is having trouble picking out calls. If he doesn't answer after you call twice, move on to another station.

If the station doesn't ID after 2 contacts, move on to the next station. Waiting waists time and can be frustrating.

Try moving your frequency by 100 Hz up or down to make yourself heard when calling.

Don't waist time calling DX stations that are moderate in strength when the rest of the band is dead. These large stations are trying to "open the band". They have very large antennas and big power. When the band does open, they will be the first ones there and have a good frequency to run on.

If the CQing station wants a "fill", meaning that he missed part of your exchange, send only what he wants and not the whole exchange all over again. He may say "name?", so you send your name and not "599 Bill".

Use CW filter bandwidths of 250 to 500 Hz to minimize QRM.

Use the “pregnant pause” to your advantage. If the station calling CQ doesn’t call a station immediately and pauses after calling CQ, that means he did not copy a call sign to come back to. He is waiting for someone to break this silence and call. Many times no one will call and he will call CQ again or send a question mark. Exploit this to your advantage. If there is a pause, immediately call ONE time. You may be the only caller and break a pileup easily with this technique.

Don’t get involved in big pile ups, especially if you have lower power and marginal antennas. This can lead to frustration. Wait and come back later when you may be the only one calling.

Operating in the last few hours of a contest can be very easy. Conversely, operating at the beginning can be very frustrating. Near the end of the contest, running stations are “begging” for contacts. They have already worked most everyone in the contest and have little or no pileups on them.

Know what your call sign sounds like at speeds of 30 to 40wpm. Code sounds very different at higher speeds and you need to know when the running station is coming back to your call. This is one time you can use a macro for learning these sounds. Part of your daily practice regimen should consist of programing your keyer or code oscillator with your call sign. Then turn up the speed. Listen and listen to your call until you can recognize it at those higher speeds. This is an extremely valuable skill to learn.

When sending your exchange, it is not necessary to say “thank you or TU”. This waists time and creates QRM for the next caller. All you ever need to send is your call sign and the exchange. The running station will say TU or just his call sign for the next caller. It will also be a sign to you that he has all of your information and your contact is good.

When you make contacts in a contest try to make 10 or more. That way your call cannot be mistaken for a “busted” or incorrectly copied call sign. Most likely the running station will get credit for the call, but it is good practice to contact more than just one station.

When looking for contacts, look in the higher frequency end of the CW band. These are where the slower stations can be found. Generally, the lower in frequency you go, the faster the stations. The very bottom end of the band, is where the multi-multi and other fast stations are running. They are very good operators and will like you to call them especially in the last few hours of a contest when they are “begging” for new contacts.

Try not to dupe, or work a station twice on the same band. Using free contest software, such as N1MM, can be a great help in logging your contacts and making sure you don’t make a dupe contact. It is not necessary to link your radio to the software to use the software for logging.

The website 3830, <https://www.3830scores.com/> is a place to submit your score of a contest or CWT for an instant view at your general standing in the contest. You need not do this if you’re not interested in the score. If you are working a CWops CWT for credit, this is the way you submit your score to CWops. Otherwise, this is NOT where you submit your score to a

contest sponsor. It is just a fast way to see scores from other operators. These are “raw” scores and have not been checked for mistakes like the sponsor will do to establish the final results of the contest. This is also a very valuable place to see past scores of contests to enable you to enter a category in the contest that will benefit your station and operating skills.

These are but some of the little “Hints and Kinks” that will help you with your higher speed practicing. Score really doesn’t matter. Increasing skills and having FUN does matter. If you would like to see more of what makes up contesting, a good place to look is the webpage of “Contest University” at <https://www.contestuniversity.com/> .

73 es GL,

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