

Contest Practice Sessions

J. B. Attili – AA2IL
Rev. 1.0 - September 2022

Radio Sport is a major activity in amateur radio. The competitive aspect of contesting can be very exhilarating but there are several other reasons to participate in contests. First, the skills required to copy information while operating your radio under pressure and/or sub-optimal conditions will make you better prepared for emergency communications. Second, if you enjoy “paper chasing,” contesting is a great way to rack up states or DXCC entities. Third, specialized contests such as VHF brings out activity on otherwise dormant bands.

CW is the most reliable mode for getting information through under adverse conditions. Compared to SSB, CW has a 10-dB advantage based on bandwidth alone. The popularity of the FTx modes make them appealing to many for casual day-to-day operating. However, at the risk of kicking over a hornet’s nest, a competent CW operator can copy weak signals at or below the noise thresholds for FTx and at a much higher rate.

In addition to the actual contests on the weekend, there are three “mini-tests” which are designed to be practice sessions. Below are the details for each, followed by some ideas for casual CW “rag chewing” practice.

CWops CWT

The CWA homework assignments emphasize the CWops CW Test (CWT). There are four hour-long sessions each week on Wednesday starting at 1300Z and 1900Z, and Thursday at 0300Z and 0700Z. (Wednesday at 6AM, noon, 8PM and midnight on the West Coast). These are very popular and fast-paced with an average speed of ~39-wpm. The exchange is your NAME and MEMBER NUMBER or STATE if you are not a member, e.g.

JOE 3177

or

JOE CA

If you are aspiring to become a CWops member, it is very helpful to participate in the CWTs so that other members will begin to recognize your call and be willing to sponsor you when you are nominated.

Don’t be intimidated by the rapid pace of the CWTs. CWops is very welcoming to new-comers and always looking for “fresh meat.” Look for slower runners higher in the band (about 40-50 KHz above the lower band edge.) It may seem counter-intuitive but try also looking for weaker stations that are less busy. These are often “little pistols” running 100W or less into wire antennas so don’t garner as much attention as the “big guns.” Just listen to someone calling CQ until you get his info and then drop in your call. If he doesn’t come back to you the first time, try again after he completes the QSO. You will eventually get through. If you can’t break through, use the quick memories on your radio to store his frequency and come back after a few minutes.

See <https://cwops.org/cwops-tests> for more info.

ICWC Medium Speed Test

The homework assignments do not mention the Medium and Slow Speed Tests probably because these are relatively new. These mini-contests are much more relaxed than the CWT and an excellent way to build up your contesting skills and confidence. At least half of the ops you will run into in these mini-tests are CWops members so your participation helps with getting your call sign recognized.

The MST was established earlier this year and sets the speed limit at 25-wpm. There are three one hour sessions each week on Monday at 1300Z and 1900Z, and Tuesday at 0300Z. (6AM, noon, 8PM on the West Coast). Note that the 0300Z session immediately follows our Zoom meeting on Monday.

The exchange is your NAME and SERIAL NUMBER (i.e. QSO NUMBER) starting at 1 for each session, e.g.

JOE 35

The MST is not nearly as popular as the CWT so you should try to work as many stations as you can hear. Scan the band a few times as the running stations will change.

See <https://internationalcwcouncil.org/mst-contest> for more info.

K1USN Slow Speed Test

The SST sets the speed limit at 20-wpm. (Incidentally, 20-wpm was the required speed for an Extra-class license back in the day and sure didn't seem slow at the time, but I digress!) There are two one hour sessions each week on Friday at 2000Z and Monday at 0000Z. (Friday 1PM and Sunday 5PM on the West Coast). The exchange is your NAME and STATE, e.g.

JOE CA

Again, the pace and activity level is such that you should try to work as many stations as you can hear. When you get to the point that you can reliably copy call signs on the first time, try running, i.e. calling CQ, e.g.

CQ SST AA2IL

When you get a caller, respond with HIS CALL and YOUR EXCHANGE:

N7AUE TU JOE CA

After he sends his info to you, e.g.

TU JIM NV

acknowledge it and get ready for another caller:

GA JIM 73 AA2IL

In a competitive contest or in the CWT, you would not include the “fluff” I’ve included here. In fact, superfluous information such as an unnecessary signal report or greeting is generally frowned upon as it slows everybody down. However, the MST and SST are much more informal and friendly and casual greetings such as those above are encouraged.

See <http://www.k1usn.com/sst.html> for more details.

Miscellaneous Notes

Look for activity in these mini-tests starting around 25-30 KHz above the lower band edge. The slower runners tend to migrate toward the upper end of the activity. Lately, I have found the the 0300Z sessions are the most productive for those of us on the West Coast. Start on 20m and drop down to 40m. The 1900Z sessions have also been decent, starting on 15m and then moving to 20m. The 0700Z CWT session is very sparse (its 3AM on the East Coast!) but more relaxed. Start on 40m, occasionally check 20m and then move to 80m.

You should get in the habit of using an actual contest logging program. N1MM is the most popular but there are others. It is reasonable to let the computer do the sending for you if you want. (The ops on the other end will appreciate the snappy well-formed CW and you will not become as fatigued.) However, at this point, do not use features such as call history or pre-fills – copy what you hear!

After each session, you should post your results to <https://3830scores.com>, even if you only managed a handful of contacts. This is a convenient way to track your progress and get more people to see your call sign. In addition, there are yearly awards by CWops based on the number of CWT sessions in which you made 10 or more contacts. This is all based on what you report to 3830 scores.

The gentlemen that maintains 3830 scores, WA7BNM, also has a website listing the various contests - <https://www.contestcalendar.com>. Look here for activities that might be of interest to you such as state QSO parties. (Shameless plug – the California QSO Party is the first weekend in October and is quite popular.) We are entering the fall contest season and there are plenty of “big” CW contests (Sweepstakes and CQ WW). Also, take a look at sites like <https://www.dx-world.net> to see what DXpeditions are under way and/or planned and at sites like <https://dxheat.com/dxc> to see who is actually on the air.

Rag Chewing

When I first started in ham radio, it was very easy to find someone to rag chew with at almost any time of day. Today, it is much more difficult but when you do find a partner, they are usually very eager to help a new-comer get some practice. Look for people on 17m and 20m during the day and 30m and 40m in the evening. Try calling CQ yourself. Also, CWops has a “give-back” program where experienced ops get on 40m in the early evening (~7PM local time) each day to solicit rag chews at moderate speeds. You can also arrange schedules with each other to get on the air or via Zoom. Programs like RufzXP and MorseRunner are excellent practice tools but there is no substitute for being on the air.

Sending Practice

Your fist is how you appear to others on the air and is very important to getting your information through. Try to use you paddles a much as possible on the air, with the possible exception of a higher speed contest like the CWT. Practice using a list of panagrams or just send random thoughts that come into your head or items you see as you look around your shack. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Although seemingly easy on the surface, this is a skill that is difficult to master.