

Healthy Contesting Habits

Minimize the physical demands of contesting with these tips.

Scott Wright, KØMD

Amateur radio contesting is a fun and competitive activity that's growing in popularity among ham radio operators of all ages.

Contesting is physically demanding, and big contests, such as the ARRL International DX CW and phone contests, require a commitment of up to 48 hours. This is equivalent to working a full-time job, all within the confines of a weekend (typically a Friday night through a Sunday night). It's no wonder so many contesters are exhausted by the time they return to work on Monday.

Let's review some healthy practices to consider while contesting (see the sidebar "Healthy and Unhealthy Approaches to Contesting" for more information).



Get Sufficient Sleep

Try to get enough sleep during the week leading up to the event. If you have difficulty sleeping, talk with your healthcare provider to see if you might have a sleep disorder. Much of

the insomnia we see today is due to too much screen time after 6:00 PM and/or the consumption of too much caffeine after dinner.

Being well rested allows for alertness and freshness of mind, preventing common mistakes that can lead to missed information and score reductions. You may want to take a half day off work on the Friday before a major contest weekend to spend the afternoon getting some sleep. Having a 1- to 2-hour nap ahead of time will often prevent early fatigue during the first night.

I believe it's important to go to bed when you're tired during a contest weekend. Sleep deprivation and the use of stimulants to stay awake do not improve your accuracy and may lead to health consequences such as cardiovascular disease and early-onset type 2 diabetes mellitus. The use of stimulants such as highly caffeinated beverages can cause a heart attack and sudden cardiac death, especially among individuals younger than 50 years old. Use of these aids to stay awake while contesting may lead to premature health problems, or worse. No top contest score is worth this cost.



Eat a Nutritious Diet

Stick to eating healthful foods before, during, and after a contest. There are no data to suggest that carbohydrate loading, something frequently done by marathon runners, has any benefit with ham radio contesting. In fact,

you may want to consume fewer calories during a contest weekend because you'll be more sedentary than usual. Keep some fresh vegetables available to snack on — carrots, radishes, broccoli, cauliflower, and small quantities of nuts are likely your best options. Of course, you should stay hydrated as well. Drink plenty of water and/or non-caffeinated, sugarless beverages to counter any dehydration induced by the heat from your shack lighting and the warmth of your tube amplifier. Allow yourself to take bathroom breaks to avoid any risks to your kidneys.



Set Up an Ergonomic Station

Design your station to minimize the damage from injuries associated with repetitive motion. Adjust the table so that the keyboard and com-

puter monitor(s) are at appropriate heights for your arms and head to avoid straining your neck, back, or wrists and arms. I experienced significant neck strain one contest season until I realized my wall-mounted monitors were several inches too high for my height. Now I use a desk-mounted monitor that prevents such strain. Find a comfortable chair that supports your lower back; I typically recommend gaming chairs. I also operate standing for periods of time while contesting, because it allows me to stretch my back and legs, restores circulation to my lower extremities, and combats fatigue. Because of this, I use wireless keyboards that I can move to a shelf on my operating desk when I want to stand. Someday, I hope to try a walking treadmill desk or stationary bicycle while contesting.



Take Regular Breaks

Most contest advice focuses on keeping your body in the chair to maximize your score. This advice is good, but like all things, it becomes a

hindrance when taken to an extreme. I recommend you take regular breaks to clear your mind, restore your focus, and stretch your muscles. The breaks can be as short as 5 minutes or as long as 30 minutes; you'll figure out what works for you.



Attend to Your Mental Health

Contesting can become an obsession, especially if you're an extremely competitive person. Talk with loved ones to determine if frequent contesting is altering your mood or keeping you from being engaged and involved with your family and friends. There are no awards given at the end of a year, decade, or lifetime for completing a given number of contests. It's not uncommon to become irritated during a contest at typing mistakes you make or with the poor operating practices of those you meet on the air, but there's no reason to let your frustration boil into anger, which can raise your blood pressure, trigger a heart attack or stroke, or simply rob you of the fun and joy of the contest activity. If you're finding yourself getting frustrated, take a short break, have a bite of food, take a walk, or change bands.



Maintain Life Balance

You're ultimately responsible for the choices you make with contesting. If you feel that going all out for 48 hours is impacting your ability to work the Monday following a contest weekend, then finish operating early enough on Sunday to recover and prepare for the work week. Contesting is part of our hobby; it's not a way of life or a source of income.



Stay in Shape During the Off Season

Professional athletes stay in shape year-round. We should approach contesting health in the same way. The most successful testers I know practice outside of the contest season to improve skills, such as copying CW despite noise, expanding their understanding of station and/or logger operations, and regularly participating in events that keep their SO2R skills fresh.

Additionally, the healthiest testers I know, mentally and physically, exercise regularly during and outside of the contest season. Some are runners and credit running for their stamina while participating in longer contests. Consider starting an exercise routine to improve

your overall health. Lose any excess weight, and work with your healthcare provider to manage any medical conditions you may have, such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, COPD, and arthritis. Work with a mental health coach on any psychological issues that may be impacting your ability to enjoy contesting.

Above all, stay connected with your community of contest friends, because they make the contest contacts worthwhile during the season.

Healthy and Unhealthy Approaches to Contesting

Healthy Habits

- Focusing on the fun of operating and worrying less about the score
- Striving to improve skills with communication and radio operation, not just earning a high score
- Savoring personal achievements with improving metrics and meeting goals
- Reconnecting with friends on the air
- Discovering more about propagation and band performance
- Learning to set and achieve goals
- Tempering personal expectations about what can be achieved
- Practicing gratefulness for the opportunity to be on the air and making contacts

Unhealthy Habits

- Depriving self of sleep for more contesting
- Excessive use of stimulants
- Dehydration
- Repetitive use of strained body parts from a non-ergonomic station
- Anger, with associated changes in blood pressure
- Poor posture, with associated joint and back pain
- Obsession with winning, especially to the point of detrimental effects on family and friendships

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