CW Contesting for Beginners
5/24/2017

Contesting is a blast and CW contesting is really cool. It's a great way to build your code speed since most folks are running 25 to 30 words per minute (wpm). It's also a great way to fill up your mailbox with QSL cards since most CW operators QSL much better than phone operators (IMHO). Every year at Field Day, a great ARRL-sponsored contest in June, W4HFH easily puts 200+ CW QSOs in the log. 10m, 15m, 20m, 40m, and 80m are loaded with signals - it's like shooting fish in a barrel. We use a narrow filter and every 500 to 1,000Hz across the CW sub-bands we put another contact in the logbook.

Wait just a minute you say, "I can barely copy my own callsign at 5 wpm." No problemo! So what's the secret? Just run an audio line from the transceiver to a computer's sound card and let software on the PC do the reading! "CWGet", available from http://www.dxsoft.com/en/products/cwget/, does a great job, most of the time, of reading well-sent Morse code. Since most contesters use electronic keyers or computers to send code, that qualifies as "well-sent." It also reads my CW and is quick to tell me if my "6A VA" exchange sounds more like "THA STA" (or worse than that around 4am). But since all we're sending is "W4HFH" and "6A VA" I get lots of practice and I think I sound pretty good most of the time.

OK, you say, "the computer is reading the code - what do I do now?" First, there are really only two kinds of contesters, those who call CQ and those who "search and pounce" or S&P - you're going to S&P for now. Actually, to get a high score you have to do both but that's a strategy for another day. "Zero-beat" your first victim, er contact, who's calling CQ. "Zero-beating" is really easy to do with CWGet.[1] My rig's sidetone is set for 500Hz. I fine-tune the rig until CWGet says it hears a 500Hz tone – you just read it on the screen (be sure to turn off the Automatic Frequency Control (AFC) so you don't chase the signal)! Now you're right on top of the guy. Here's where the narrow filter is handy since CWGet will have an easier time if it only hears one station. Listen *and watch* the guy as he makes an exchange with another operator. If CWGet is hearing a clear strong signal you should be able to pick off his callsign and exchange from the screen and enter it in the log (but don't hit the Enter key just yet). If not, just listen and watch until it does. Or just listen to a couple of exchanges to verify that CWGet is hearing correctly. This is where your code speed will improve dramatically as the contest progresses. Yes Virginia, you can hear callsigns at 25 to 30 wpm – it's a real confidence builder! If you listen to a CQ called enough times you'll get the callsign, even *without* help from CWGet.

Now wait just another minute – we entered the guy's call and exchange in the log but we haven't worked him yet – isn't that a little premature? Not at all – you *will* work him – I promise! Here's why: (1) he has a big signal, (2) you're right on top of him, (3) he's calling CQ so that means he's a big-time contester (or at least pretending to be), and (4) he's calling at 25 to 30 wpm which means he's a big-time CW operator who can certainly copy your

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[1] Technically, this isn't really "zero-beating" but is close enough for our purposes.

callsign being sent at 5 wpm or however fast you want to send it. Let's say you hear (or see) W4QRQ sending "CQ TEST W4QRQ". The really good contest ops don't send "de" or send their callsign 14 times. Actually, his computer or contest keyer is doing the sending and he's just listening for a new callsign. "TEST" means he's working the contest; you might also hear the name of the contest like "FD" or "SS", instead of "TEST". When "he" pauses between CQs, send your callsign; *just* your callsign and *just* once. No "2 by 2" calls; no "my name is Joe, your RST is 599". *Just* your callsign and only *once*. And send your call at whatever speed you're comfortable *sending*. But, you say, "I was told in code class to send at the speed I'm comfortable *receiving*." Well, that's fine for ragchewing but we're contesting now! Anyway, you already know what W4QRQ is going to send you – it's already in the log! So fire away on your favorite key. If you really want to sound like a big-time contester have your PC do the sending. But I'd recommend using the contest to work on your manual sending ability. So you send your call once. Maybe you hear part of your call like "KJ4?" – send your entire callsign again. He (or she – there are plenty of great YL ops out there!) hears you and responds with "KJ4QRS 31A NH" or whatever *your* call and *his* exchange is. Or he hears someone else and works them first. Or his contest keyer is doing all the work and he's over at the ice chest getting another beer. If he doesn't hear you just keep trying. If he responds to you then just send *his* call and *your* exchange once. Nothing else, don't send a "de" or a KN prosign or send stuff twice. If you hear a "?" or "AGN" send it again. If he asks for part of the exchange, like "SEC?" or "NR?", just send that. If you can't figure out what he needs just send the whole exchange again. When he gets it, and he will, he usually sends "X" or "TU" for "thank you" and then he starts calling CQ again. Just hit the enter key on your PC and move on to your next QSO. You've just worked your first contest QSO at 25 to 30 wpm! Try it, you'll like it!

73 de Ian N8IK