

Contesting... What is it?

Dale Cole, K8TS

To be honest, I was arm-twisted into this but have been remiss. This is the peak of contesting season, and I have been busy!

Back in the late nineties, I got interested in doing two things. The first was to earn my DXCC (worked and confirmed 100 countries) award, and also to earn the WAE (worked all Europe) award. Two simple awards. A friend from St. Joseph, Michigan gave me a shove and told me I could work my 100 countries in one weekend. At that time, it was possible due to the solar cycle. I even had my own qsl card manager help me along.



It took a little longer than a weekend, but around 2001 I submitted my first 100 to the ARRL. I was hooked. After about 200-225 countries, they start to come much slower as you wait for people to go to exotic places and put rare countries on the air. There are only 340. (I'm at 267)

What does all that have to do with contesting? I just wanted to explain, how I got started, and the idea of working 100 countries in one weekend sounded thrilling. The contest that got me started is the "grand-daddy" of all contests, sponsored by CQ Magazine called CQ Worldwide DX. The contest was established in 1948 (at least that's as far as the records were kept). The contest lasts 48 hours on the last weekend in October and the last weekend in November. The first is the SSB weekend, the second, the CW weekend. In 2020 there were 9,241 logs received from around the world on the SSB weekend. For those who like to work CW (and they say it is either dead or dying), there were 9,103 logs submitted. So, it's not dead yet! In fact, in 2016, there were almost 800 more CW logs than SSB. (Go figure) They have been pretty much neck and neck since. My first CQ WW contest was in 1998. That year there were about 3500 SSB logs and 3300 CW logs. You have to remember ham radio is a dying hobby.

We will walk through the CQ WW DX contest as an example of contesting. Each log by the way does not indicate a participant. In many stations (like mine) there is only one operator, but however, many stations use 8-10 operators, quite possibly having a station on each band all going simultaneously, around the clock, and the results are contained in just one log. The idea is to contact as many different stations in different countries (340), and as many different zones (40), as possible in those 48 hours.

As you can see, there is no lack of stations to contact. One thing to keep in mind is many stations do not even submit a log. They have the excuse that they only had a few minutes for a beer and to rest between "honey-do" projects and got on the air and only made 10-15 contacts. So, it is easy to imagine there being 10,000 stations on the air. (For you single guys, lots of women operators too)

So, what do you talk about? You make contact, they will tell you how strong your signal is and where they are from. You do the same. Done. The challenges are, most of all to do better than you did last year. Did you make more contacts than last year? Or did you operate fewer hours than last year, but contact more stations in a shorter period? Did your score earn you any kind of award?

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Award? Are you kidding? No. Entries are broken down into categories to level the playing field. Those multi-operator, multi-transmitter stations I talked about... they only compete against themselves, but if you work one it counts for you too. A single operator can be a QRP station or work with low power or high power. When it comes to awards, QRP stations are only judged against QRP stations. AND they are only judged against other QRP stations in their zone. For instance, KA8SMA won 1st Place, QRP station in Zone 4 (most of middle America), placed 5th in North America, and 25th in the World! He (and his 5 watts) are located in Traverse City, Michigan. That had to be a thrill. And he made less than 200 contacts. There is room for everyone to compete against their peers and compete with the “big guns” as the multi-operator stations are referred to. Operation for the whole weekend is not required.

Skill level needed? There is a first time for everyone. Nothing special is needed except a microphone (or key) and being willing to learn. I would be happy to have someone who wants to learn to join me in any of the many different contests coming up. The ARRL DX contest is coming up within about a month, there is the Michigan Contest (where you are the “hunted”) in April, in May there is another CQ contest and lots of small ones in between. As far as equipment for many years it was 100 watts and a backyard vertical for me.

Some of you may recall we had K8PGJ speak at one of the club meetings a couple of years ago. He lives in Troy, Michigan, and usually operates from the PJ2T station off the coast of Venezuela. In 2019 Pete and the others at that station racked up over 10,000 contacts! They are one of those big guns, with multiple operators and multiple transmitters. They placed 1st in the World that year. They had operators that could do more than 300 contacts (individually) in an hour. Me? In the category I was judged in, I was number 1 in our zone, number 450 in North America, and number 991 in the world. This past year I received (not to brag, but I will) an invitation to operate at one of the big gun stations in the Caribbean later this year. That station was number one in the world several years ago. You just don't know where this stuff will take you. It sure can be pretty thrilling though.