

Message from the Prez — Zen and the Art of Multi-Op: Some Observations on Multi-Operator Contest Discipline

by Larry Serra, N6NC

I have had the good fortune to operate and observe at numerous multi-operator contest stations in the last few years. Some were successful, even won world or continent plaques. Others turned in big scores, but never seemed to get to the first spot in the rankings. What follows is not a polemic, but a series of my observations — just the facts ma'am — on what works and what doesn't at multi-operations.



1. Fashion a Strategic Plan.

Before the contest begins, the operators should agree on a strategic plan covering all 48 hours of the test. It might be followed to the letter, allowing for opportunism to seize advantages, but in the absence of radical conditions warranting change, the plan will be followed to build the QSO count. The plan can be modeled on previous success in that contest — what worked is always safe — or structured from other winning stations' band changes, time on bread and butter bands (20m and 15m, then 40m) and specialty bands (160m, 10m), splits, mode changes, mult hunting, and the like. Basically, every op should know and agree on the overall strategy for the full 48 hours and, if the manpower allows, one op can act as quarterback to suggest band and mode changes as the situation warrants, based on the plan and opportunities perceived during the test.

2. Create a Watch Bill.

Multi-operations bring together ops with various skill levels and specific interests. With a plan agreed upon, a watch bill of 4 to 6 hour watches should be constructed to accommodate the skill levels and interests of the team members. The top single ops should always take the first 4 hours of the contest to maximize QSOs at the time when rates are generally the highest in the test.

Those ops should also be scheduled for at least part of the other high rate times during the weekend on the bread and butter bands. Schedule special interest band operators for slots they like; 160m/80m guys work together to open those bands on the first night; night-owl ops who like low bands can stay up for longer night-time stints (6

hours) to milk out 160m, 80m and 40m for those slow-time Qs that are important to final scores. The night shift is a good time to have at least two ops to watch, at least for moral support, and to help keep the other guy awake. Multi-chaser ops can man the spotting rig as primary duty for times when several bands are open. The other benefit of a watch bill is that there are predictable off-duty times around which ops can arrange their rest schedules, barring equipment emergencies that require all hands. Make sure quiet rest areas are available all day and night for off-duty ops.

3. Equipment, Physical Layout, and Quiet.

Creating and following a watch bill with predictable rest time presupposes an equipment setup that is rock-solid reliable, and which will not likely require waking all

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hands in the middle of the night to rescue a tilting tower, fallen antenna, or dying computer or generator. Spend the preparation time before the test (and a few shakedown runs) to insure that your equipment, cables and supporting gear will wire and work together without glitches. This avoids waking sleeping ops during the test to deal with equipment emergencies.

Station layout is important and different for phone and CW tests. In CW tests the operating positions can be quite close to each other (RFI permitting) because the operators will be quiet and wearing headphones. A good CW (and phone) contest operation is like a ship's bridge during combat operations: quiet, serious, but relaxed and receptive to all going on around.

A phone contest by its nature is noisier because of ops speaking. Phone operating positions should be as far as possible from each other, facing back-to-back, with a physical acoustical divider (if possible) to keep each operator's position quiet and distraction-free so he can concentrate on his task. For both phone and CW tests, there should be no talking, joking, pranking or fooling around in the vicinity of the operating positions, and the only talk to the ops should be to convey contest specific information (band changes, mult spots, equipment changes, etc.).

1998 SCCC Meeting Schedule

February 28, W6EEN, Bermuda Dunes
May 2, Visalia International DX Convention
June 6, N6ND, Ramona
August ?, Summer Bash
October 10, N6VR, Ojai
December 19, K6LA, Los Angeles

Try to remember the lesson of ESPN's on-board camera and mics during the America's Cup Races. The quieter and less movement there is onboard, the more disciplined and successful the boat usually is. (I remember the stoney silence of the New Zealand boat's crew during the last America's Cup Race in San Diego. There was never a peep or movement from the crew — and they won all of a staggering 41 races through the capture of the Cup!)

4. Food, Meals and Alcohol.

Less is more: light grazing is better than full, sit-down meals until the test is over. Each op can bring whatever he likes to eat and drink, then wander in and out and munch as and when he likes. We usually cook a pot of chili or spaghetti for Saturday night, with off-duty ops sitting down together for a few minutes, then wandering off to rest or go on watch. Breakfast is an idiosyncratic meal for most folks, so we bring cereal or muffins and coffee or tea per our individual preferences. Lunch can be sandwiches, or fruit, or microwaved something. Individually we bring fruit, cookies, special soda or juices.

Not to sound like the WCTU, but we allow NO alcohol anymore on our multi-operator tests. We have had operators who operated fine tanked up with spirits, but we found the personality and attitude of drinking ops changed, causing other ops to walk around on eggshells and enjoy the test less. The U/I ops were useless if any equipment emergencies arose during the night. There is plenty of time after the test is over on Sunday to cook or go out for a meal and drink a few before retiring. Hangovers are a real impediment to early rising and quick and efficient equipment tear-down on DXpedition tests.

5. Eliminate Distractions.

I guess the cardinal rule is: eliminate distractions from the quiet, calm, efficient and relentless working of QSOs by each operator in a multi-op. Unreliable equipment, quirky computers, faltering generators, intermittent coax, loose-cannon antennas, noise, too much food, too much talk, alcohol, unpredictable operating times and concomittant lack of rest are all distractions to be avoided. Good hospitality and good food can go too far and become distractions, as can a chatty, war story atmosphere in the shack, cocktails, sit-down dinners and football games on TV. (I hope this doesn't sound like the "Jesuit Contesting Team!").

All operators should agree on some ground rules along the lines of those I've described above to make sure they are all on the same wavelength of commitment and strategy in their approach to the multi-op contest. Settling these matters by consensus of the team's ops can go a long way toward maximizing your QSO count, mults, and the feeling of mastery and enjoyment you get when you approach the contest to win. Even if you don't win the first time, try these principles with your multi-op team, and you will get closer to the top, and enjoy and appreciate your collective effort.

The Editor's Ramblings

by Bruce Horn, WA7BNM

Although we are midway in the 1997-98 contest season (for some reason I always equate contest seasons with school years), the end of 1997 is rapidly approaching. It seems like my work and personal schedule kept me

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from entering as many contests this year in a serious fashion as I did in 1996. Of course, one reason is that 1996 was unusual in that I was able to compete in CQWW CW, whereas this year I was back to my normal schedule that prevents me from participating in this contest. However, it seemed that many contest weekends conflicted with work or personal commitments to the degree that there were a number of contests that I got on the air just enough to say I handed out a few QSOs. I hope 1998 allows opportunity for full-time activity in a number of contests — particularly with the promising increase in solar flux.

The club web site now has an area devoted to contest records and top scores from recent years for W6-land. Currently, this information is posted for CQWW, CW and phone, with top scores for most categories back through 1990. As I have time, I plan to add similar records and results for other popular contests. You may want to peruse this information for added motivation prior to a contest, selecting a single-band category, or attempting a new W6

record. Comments are welcome, although it's a lot easier to think of contests that would be of interest than it is to dig the results out of back issues of *QST* or *CQ*.

The *CQ* magazine folks are considering adding an ARRL-type multi-two category to the CQWW and WPX contests. If you have an opinion about this potential new category, let Larry, N6NC, know what you think. He is gathering SCCC member reaction to this idea.

As a follow up to my review of TOPO! in the September/October issue of *SCCCORE*, the Los Angeles and vicinity version of TOPO! has been updated and renamed Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Surrounding Recreational Areas. It provides complete coverage of Los Angeles, Orange and Ventura counties, and partial coverage of San Bernardino, Riverside, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties. This means that hams can use TOPO! to produce terrain profiles for sites in Palmdale/Lancaster or areas between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara.

Best wishes to all SCCCers for the holiday season and may 1998 be filled with abundant solar flux and the best scores ever.

SCCCORE

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Membership in the SCCC is open to anyone. Dues are:

Domestic: \$5 per year

Mexico/Canada: \$8 per year

Other countries: \$10 per year

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New/Membership/Renewal (return to Bruce Horn, 4225 Farmdale Ave., Studio City, CA 91604) — Cut Here —

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Dues: \$5.00 domestic, \$8.00 Canada/Mexico, \$10.00 elsewhere Make check payable to SCCC.

☐ If you would like a club badge, check here and include an additional \$6.00.

SCCC Calendar

December

- 13-14 ARRL 10-Meter Contest
- 13-14 TARA RTTY Sprint
- 27-28 Stew Perry Topband Challenge
- 28 RAC Canada Winter Contest

January

- 3-4 ARRL RTTY Roundup
- 9-11 Japan International DX Contest 160-40
- 10-11 North America QSO Party, CW
- 17-18 North America QSO Party, Phone
- 17-19 ARRL January VHF Sweepstakes
- 23-25 CQ 160-Meter Contest, CW

February

- 1 North American Sprint, Phone
- 8 North American Sprint, CW
- 14-15 HAL WW RTTY WPX Contest
- 14 Asia-Pacific Sprint, CW
- 21-22 ARRL International DX Contest, CW
- 27-1 CQ 160-Meter Contest, Phone

Next Meeting: Saturday, Dec. 20

Time: 11:00 A.M. - 2:00 P.M.

Hosted by Arnie, N6HC

10931 Hunting Horn Dr.

Santa Ana

(714)-573-2965

Directions:

Take I-5 or I-405 to 22 Fwy East

Take the 55 Fwy North

Exit at Chapman Ave. East

Follow Chapman east to Crawford Canyon
(~ 2 miles)

Turn right on Crawford Cyn and go to end

Turn left on Newport

Turn right on Cowan Heights Blvd (1st sig)

Turn right on Skyline (1st right)

Continue less than 0.5 mile

Turn right on Hunting Horn Dr.

SCCCORE

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