

Contesting for the Beginner

Contesting with Alan, VK4SN January 2010

Introduction

Contesting grew out of other amateur radio activities in the 1920s and 1930s. As transoceanic communications with amateur radio became more common, competitions were formed to challenge stations to make as many contacts as possible with amateur radio stations in other countries. Contests were also formed to provide opportunities for amateur radio operators to practice their message handling skills, used for routine or emergency communications across long distances. Over time, the number and variety of radio contests has increased, and many amateur radio operators today pursue the sport as their primary amateur radio activity.

(Extract from wiki)

Many newcomers have populated the contest bands since the introduction of the Foundation Licence. It is excellent to hear more calls on air to increase the fun of contesting.

The international contests normally run over a 24 or 48 hour period. Starting on a Saturday and finishing the following Monday is a very long time to sit on a radio. Some operators stay up over night and put in a grand effort, but over a 48 period, one will find that multi operator is a better choice for them.

A good place to start is short single band, single operator contests. There are many local VK contests that run for one or six hours. One-hour contests are normally referred to as sprints. If you are not real confident to kick off on your own, then I am sure any contesting Amateur you ask will let you drop in and let you watch and get some useful operating tips. Any contest group would welcome you. Join them for a weekend and more than likely you would get a go on the radio and guidance would be forthcoming even if you don't ask.

Most Aussie contests are fairly casual, and you can just call, or answer calls at your leisure to get into the swing of things. Simply contact as many stations as possible during that period of operation. A list of VK contests including dates and times, and some rules are found on the www.wia.org.au website. There are a few short VK contests for P29, VK and ZL stations. 80 meters is commonly used, and the VK/Trans-Tasman contest includes 160, 80 and 40 meter categories. Other contests include all bands (Except WARC) and run over a Saturday and Sunday.

Getting Started

Before making your first QSO, there are certain things you must do. Well, you don't have to, but prior planning prevents poor performance. And if it's your first time, it's good practice to have a system check over.

1. Select the contest you would like to enter and read and understand the rules.
2. Check your radio for operation. You may have lent your ATU to someone and forgotten to get it back.
3. Check the antennas are resonant on the frequencies of operation.
5. Make sure you have the latest version of logging software as last minute rule changes or point scoring will have been updated in the software.
6. Check the logger program serial connection to the radio is working if you want automatic frequency and mode logging.
7. Check the rules for start time and have a bottle of water nearby to keep the vocal cords lubed.
8. If you have decided to hand write the log, draw up a log sheet with information already known to save time during logging. The consecutive serial number that you give out can be written in. Most signal reports are 59. No-one seems to care that you may be 57. 59 is easier and normally pre entered in logging software. Cater for 80 to 100 contacts if you are going in a sprint / one hour contest.

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Most contests include an exchange of RS(T) and a sequential number starting at 001.
A typical exchange may take the following format.

1. CQ contest this is VK4SN
2. VK4SN this is VK4FJ
3. VK4FJ you are 59 003 QSL? (FJ is SN's 3rd contact)
4. Roger QSL 003, you are 59 004 QSL? (SN is FJ's 4th contact)
5. Thank you. CQ contest de VK4SN
6. etc...

If you are really serious and want a quick exchange, the exchange might go like.

1. CQ contest VK4SN
2. VK4FJ
3. VK4FJ 59 001
4. Thank you 59 003
5. CQ contest VK4SN
6. etc

Logging Software

There are many logging software programs around to try, but the recommended one to use is the world standard N1MM logger. It is well supported and has User Defined Contests (UDC) available for all VK contests. VKCL logger is well by its use by date and is no longer supported but will still be available to use with the Remembrance Day, Harry Angel and Trans Tasman contests – if the user pays attention to correctly setting it up.

Let's look at the finer details for smooth operation of the contest. Imagine you are sitting there with a hand mic, pencil and paper or worse still, a keyboard instead of paper. Try keeping up holding a mic in one hand and trying to type one fingered, or write on a piece of paper that wants to run around the desk. Not a good way to start. Items that will help with contesting are a headset with microphone and a foot switch for PTT (Push to talk). Using VOX instead of a foot switch is fine as long as you are on your own. For multi operator stations VOX is disastrous as the operator next to you is probably a screamer and will trigger the VOX on your radio. Using a headset and foot switch allows two free hands for accurate logging.

A computer headset microphone will not function on your radio due to impedance mismatch. Heil and Radio Sport headsets are the preferred choice of testers. These are not that cheap but are aimed at the professional tester. The headsets have an attenuation of 40dB keeping out the loud operator next to you and allowing good reception and concentration racking in the DX. The cheaper headsets are just perfect for single op home stations. Using the headset allows two free hands for accurate logging.

Antennas

For starters you are probably already set up for 80mtrs. A horizontal antenna is best for VK contacts although a vertical will suffice, but is more aimed at DX work rather than local. A half wave dipole is probably the most common setup with the average ham but a full wave loop on 80mtrs has more gain, if you can fit it in the back yard. These antennas have a high angle of radiation making them perfect for VK / ZL communications.

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Logging calls

As per the example above, calling CQ contest and logging an exchange seems easier enough. What happens when two or more stations reply to your call. You may not get a complete callsign due to stations on top of one and other and you hear only the last letter of a call. Rather than call again, your reply could be “station ending in Zulu – again”. Only the station whose call ends in Z will come back to you. This is a quick way to eliminate all the stations coming back to you again. A low signal station and/or effect from large static crashes are examples of hard to get calls. Many a request for the callsign or serial number may occur. Using correct phonetics is essential as that is what you will be listening for. So many stations make up their own phonetics making it hard to grasp a name. The only exception I have experienced is for overseas contacts, where the use of country names can be an advantage due to accent or pronunciation differences of the standard code. Repeating a call or number three times in succession will help.

In Summary

Remember:-

- Keep the contest date free
- Read and understand the rules
- Confirm your radio and antennas work on the intended band/s
- Update your logging software
- How to save the log file
- How to attach the log file to an email
- Email the log to the contest manager or submit as per the rules.
- Starting with VK contests is a good place to start and build up your confidence and operating skills. It is also a good way to become familiar with your radio, how your antenna performs, and propagation.
- Hope to hear you on air. Alan, VK4SN