

We thank **Rob K6RB** for these CW contesting tip documents:
“**Do’s and Don’ts.pdf**” and “**More Do’s....pdf**” (combined
here in this single document)

These tips are meant for those who may want to delve
into the more advanced/faster/less casual CW contesting
than we offer in the slow and easy SST sessions.

We do NOT require strict adherence to these or any other
generally accepted norms of high speed contesting in the
weekly SST events.

However, these lists may help new testers to understand
what will be expected of them in high speed CW contests.

Thanks very much Rob, K6RB

-K1USN Radio Club

Do's and Don'ts in CW Contesting

Rob Brownstein, K6RB

With K1USN's Slow-Speed Test (SST) becoming increasingly popular among lower-speed CW operators, some folks who avoided CW contests because they were just too fast are now beginning to participate. Like its high-speed cousin, CWT, SST is not an adjudicated contest and no logs are submitted. Summary scores are simply entered using 3830scores (3830scores.com). But, unlike CWT, many of the SST players are new to CW contesting and possibly contesting, in general. So, this piece is meant to help them understand how to avoid practices that immediately identify them as "inexperienced" without having to push their speeds higher or use computer-generated exchange messaging.

Basics

All contests – CW, phone, RTTY and mixed-mode – have one thing in common. The goal is to make as many valid QSOs within a contest's allotted time. Period. Therefore, whether operating at 10 wpm or 40 wpm, it is best to limit the time per QSO as much as possible while retaining validity. Anything extra that is sent simply takes extra time, and that works against the overall goal.

In a CW contest there are two fundamental operating techniques – running and searching & pouncing (S&P). A runner sits on a single frequency and sequentially works S&P callers. The runner does so by calling CQ, answering a call, sending an exchange, receiving a return exchange, and repeating. So, if I'm running, I send, for example, "CQ SST K6RB" and I pause. If no callers, I repeat. When, say, K4BAI calls me, I send "K4BAI rob ca" and I pause. He sends "tu john ga," and I respond "tu K6RB" and pause. That tells John that we're good and tells anyone else queued up to call me that I'm ready for a new call. Sometimes if I hear two or more stations calling at the same time, when I finish with one, I will send just "tu" and pause. Once I'm down to just one caller, I begin using "tu K6RB" again at the end of a QSO.

Notice that John did NOT send "de K4BAI" or "K6RB de K4BAI," he just sent K4BAI. Notice also, that I sent K4BAI just once and neither of us sent a callsign until we finished and I sent "tu K6RB." There's a good reason for this. First, every runner knows his callsign so there's no need to send it; and, second, it wastes time. When I come back to John, I don't send "K4BAI de K6RB rob ca," I just send "K4BAI rob ca."

As an S&Per, never send the runner's callsign followed by your callsign. It's not necessary and wastes time. If there are more than one caller, the one sending the runner's callsign is going to be so far behind the others who just send their callsigns, that he/she may never be called. And, when the runner comes back to you, by sending your callsign and his exchange, don't send his callsign followed by your callsign. Again, it's unnecessary and a waste of time. Just send "r" or "tu" followed by your exchange.

Let's say I copy John's callsign as K4BAE instead K4BAI. So, I send "K4BAE rob ca." If John just sends "tu john ga," then I have him logged wrong. In a real contest, that will cost me. So, John sends "K4BAI tu john ga." When I hear him send his call, again, I know I goofed and listen

for my error and correct it in my log. That's another reason not to send your callsign when you respond to the runner's exchange because he/she assumes they made an error.

Notice that in none of the samples do you see "bk" or "qsl?" or "btu." Just pause. In a contest, that's what's expected. There's no reason to send anything unnecessary for QSO validity. In any contest – CW or otherwise – the most important thing is to get the callsign correct. If you mess up an exchange element, you may lose a point, but if you mess up a callsign, you lose the whole QSO and any multipliers it may have provided you. Strive to get the callsign correct.

Summary

Here are some samples of best-practices in a contest. I'll use SST as an example.

First station: CQ SST K6RB

Second station: N0TA

First station: N0TA rob ca (or N0TA tu rob ca)

Second station: tu john co

First station: tu K6RB...

First station: CQ SST K6RB

Second station: N0TA

First station: N0TT rob ca

Second station: N0TA john co

First station: TA tu K6RB

You will hear some runners send something like CQ CQ CQ SST K2UMU K2UMU then pause. The rationale is that by transmitting longer, they are more likely to attract an S&Per who is passing by. But, if they do that every time, they are wasting a lot of time, especially if they get called 90 percent of the time after one call. I believe it is better to send CQ SST K2UMU, wait a second, and if no callers, repeat, and so on. In a busy contest, I'm going to get called on first call very often. Therefore, I want to keep those calls as short as possible.

SST is a great way to build up contest skills. As you get faster, you may want to take a whack at CWT. In the beginning, even at the slower speeds, it is easier to S&P than to run. When you run, and call CQ, you have to get the responder's call correct, the first time, as often as possible. If you don't, you waste your time and his/her time. With S&P, you can sit on a runner, get all the info first, then make your call.

With SST, once you feel confident that you can copy most calls in one shot, then by all means try running for at least half the time. When your running skills equal your S&P skills, usually running will produce more QSOs per hour. That said, in some contests, like SST and CWT, runners are working only S&Pers, and S&Pers are working only runners. To get the best results, you have to do both. The proportion of time spent running or S&P'ing will depend on your skills and your station. A QRP station with a wire antenna will most likely get more QSOs doing S&P than running.

A QRO station with a gain antenna may get more QSOs running than S&P'ing. So, be strategic about your choices. Most important...have a lot of fun.

More Do's and Don'ts in CW Contesting

Rob Brownstein, K6RB

For Runners:

If you have any doubts that the you have the caller's sign wrong, or exchange wrong, you need to make sure before they move on. Once they move on, you are stuck with what you have. After the other station calls, and before giving an exchange, you can send a partial with a question mark. For example, if K4BAI calls me and fade knocked out the I and all I heard was K4BA, I could first go "K4BA?" and wait for him to come back with his call, again. Or, I could send "K4BA 5nn ca" and if he is a good op, he will send "K4BAI (maybe twice) 5nn ca." Either way ensures that I have his correct call. I'd rather make an exchange error than a call error because it will cost me more points. If the exchange is RST and state, and I'm not sure if it was MA or MI or ME, I can send QTH?

When running, if you have a mini-pile up calling you, it is okay to just send "tu" without your call after a few subsequent QSOs. If there were four people calling you, and you did this up to three times, you can work through the four callers without adding to the pile by using your call sign after each QSO. I would not do this more than three times before giving my call, again, because operators who do not hear you call but think they need you will start sending "?" or "call?" in the middle of things, creating QRM. Most will wait patiently for a couple or three QSOs. You can also send your call after every QSO but if you build up a pile, you will start sending partials a lot of the time, which wastes time. It is a judgment call. I never go more than three QSOs before sending my call, again.

If you have been running on a frequency and someone sidles up to you, never sends QRL?, and just starts grinding away, you no doubt want to mess that other operator up. But, don't do it. If there's room to move a few tens of Hz away from the offender, just do so and continue running. If not, just move on and look for another clear spot.

Finally, before beginning a run, make sure the frequency is unoccupied. Send QRL?, then pause, then send it again. If you hear no one, start your CQ. Also, if you can, try to situate yourself so you are hearing no other runner signals, high or low.

For S&Pers

When a runner pauses after a CQ, you can drop your call in immediately, or if you hear other callers (operate full QSK if you can so you can hear other callers), then you may want to delay and reply a bit later. Alternatively, you may want to call the runner slightly higher or lower in frequency so that you stand out in a crowd of callers. You can use XIT for that, or, you can tune the caller in higher or lower than your sidetone frequency which will automatically shift you from being zero beat with the runner. Being off zero beat and using timing delays can make up for being low power with a wire or vertical antenna. The "big gun" guys that are zero beat will beat each other up and be

indecipherable meanwhile there you are, slightly higher or lower in frequency, at lower signal strength, but clearly distinctive.

When you work a runner in a contest where the exchange is always the same (e.g. RST and S/P/C e.g. state, province, country), if you're not sure you have the runner's call or exchange correct, you can simply wait for him/her to work the next station and listen to call/exchange again. If the contest has incrementing QSO numbers, every exchange is slightly different. If you copied "5nn 8_", you can send "nr?" or you can wait for the station to work a new QSO. If the serial number sent is 85, you know your serial number was 84 (just subtract one). The point is, when you are an S&P station you have the choice of delaying the runner by asking for fills, or just hanging a bit longer and getting the missing info from his/her next QSO. When I'm S&P, I usually do the latter so I don't delay the runner.

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

I know of only one contest where you may be penalized if someone busts your call. In all others, the operator who logs the wrong call gets busted. As an S&Per, you could move up and down the band and work a bunch of runners, and if they screw up your call, you figure that's their problem, not yours. But, trust me, when people start looking at results and they see that a lot of people busted K6RB's call, it raises questions. You can't prevent people from busting your call completely but you can help avoid it, somewhat, by paying attention to what they send. If you are K3PP and you hear a runner come back to K4PP, don't just send "tu 5nn pa." Send "K3PP (and maybe PP right after) then 5nn pa. You've done your job by helping the runner avoid a busted call.

Some people will hold off sending an exchange if a runner sends the wrong call. For example, if I sent K4PP 5nn ca to K3PP, he may send K3PP K3PP and pause without sending an exchange. I would then send K3PP 5nn ca. Then, he would send tu 5nn pa. However, doing this delays both the runner and pouncer, and only the runner is at risk of losing points. So, why not be a good citizen and send K3PP 5nn pa rather than holding off the exchange. If the runner gets it, and fixes it, then great. If not, you've done your job without delaying either of you.

Should I Delete a QSO?

When, if ever, should you delete a QSO from your log? If in the above example after K3PP moved on, if I wasn't sure if he was K4PP or K3PP, I might be tempted to just delete that QSO. If I do, and he submits his log showing a QSO with K6RB, he gets a "not in log" penalty – one he did not deserve! On the other hand, if I leave in the K4PP QSO and he submits a log, I get a busted-call penalty – which I deserve. So, in that case, I would not delete the QSO.

What about a case where runner K6RB responds to pouncer K3PP, and gives his 5nn ca exchange, and K3PP gives his 5nn pa exchange but K6RB never sends "tu" and just starts CQing. Did K6RB log the QSO? Who knows? In that case, especially if both signals were very weak, I might be tempted to delete the QSO (me being K3PP). But, probably not.

The Dreaded NIL

NIL means “not in log.” It’s a way to let the other operator know that you have not logged the QSO. If someone sends you “NIL,” then don’t log the QSO on your end, either. If you do, it will trigger a not-in-log penalty.

As a runner, if I work someone, give my exchange, and keep missing critical parts of the other operator’s exchange, I will stop after, say, three attempts and send “sri too qsb nil.” After all, there is time pressure and if you spend several minutes trying to ferret out a missing serial number, you may pay for it in lost opportunities to work other QSOs.

In a typical sequence, in a contest like ARRL Sweepstakes, where the first part of the exchange is serial number and precedent (e.g. 124A), under adverse conditions, I may copy 1_4_). So, I send “nr nr ?” He sends “124A” two times and I copy 1__ A. So, I ask for number, again. This time I get _4_ because of deep fade. At that point I would send “sri too qsb nil.”

It never fails that when conditions are marginal, the QSB always takes out the same digit. After three attempts, if no joy, I move on.

There should never be a reason to send NIL to a runner. He’s not moving anywhere. So, if you have any exchange or callsign doubts, just stand by and listen to his next QSO.

Should I Log a Duplicate QSO?

Should you log a duplicate call? Today’s contest logging software does a great job of pointing out when you get a duplicate call. Some people will simply send “b4” (as in we worked before) and move on; some will complete the entire QSO and log it. Today, logging a duplicate has no penalty. When the logs are adjudicated, you simply get no credit for the duplicate QSO – no harm, no foul. I absolutely recommend logging every QSO – even those flagged as duplicates. Let’s say K3PP calls me a second time and my logger shows a dupe. Maybe he had me logged earlier as K5RB. If I turn him away, he’s going to get a “not in log” penalty. If we both log it, he gets credit for the K6RB QSO and when my log is checked against his, the dupe in mine and the error (K5RB) QSO are taken note of. We both get credit for one of the two QSOs.

To Log or Not to Log...

No one sends in a log for SST or CWT. Logs are not required. However, what about a contest like California QSO Party (CQP)? This is a real contest, with logs submitted, and scores computed with awards for high score in different categories. So, K6RB decides it’s Saturday, 2 PM, and there’s a contest on 20 meters. He figures out it’s CQP and sees that his exchange should be serial number and county. So, he calls AD4EB and sends “1 SCRUI” for QSO number 1 in Santa Cruz County. Then, he works WB2UZE and sends “2 SCRUI,” and after about five minutes he has made 15 QSOs but decides he’d rather take the dog for a walk. So, he stops, and never sends in his log. Oh, no! Does that mean the 15 people he worked will lose those QSOs? Not at all. The log checking software will see that K6RB’s call shows up in up to 15 submitted logs, so he must have been a player. So, it’s okay to dabble in a contest and later decide not to submit a log. Everyone who worked you will get credit, but you will not be eligible for score listing or awards.