

## **Contesting for the Beginner**

### 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. (I for one like my sleep).

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](http://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 even includes a 160 meter category. 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 antenna is resonant on the frequency of operation.
4. Decide whether to use a logging program or hand write the log.

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5. If you are using a computer for logging, make sure you have the latest version of 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.

A competitor may wish to hand log and enter details in the logging software at a later time. If you are not familiar or quick with a keyboard or the software, then this is for you. Typing directly into logging software is for those confident on a keyboard and with the software in use. Most loggers allow post entry of contacts.

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 59003 QSL? (FJ is SN's 3<sup>rd</sup> contact)
4. Roger QSL 003, you are 59004 QSL? (SN is FJ's 4<sup>th</sup> 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 59001
4. Thank you 59003
5. CQ contest VK4SN
6. etc

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### Logging Software

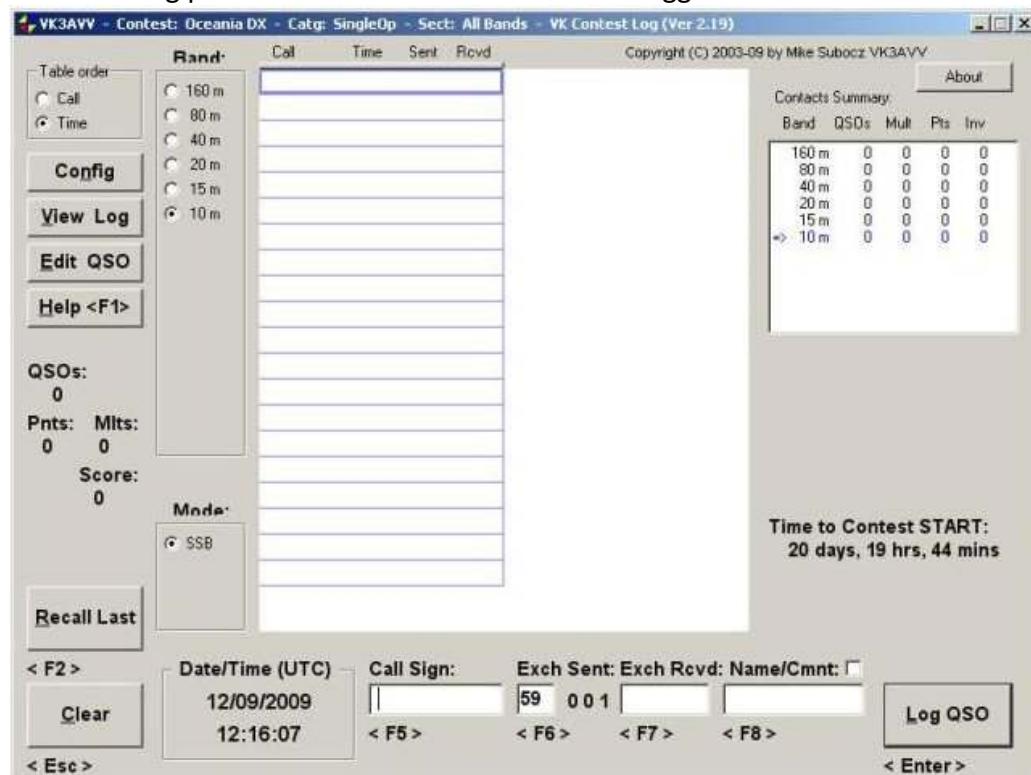
There are many logging software programs around to try.

SD LOGGER by Paul O'Kane EI5DI <http://www.ei5di.com/>

W3KM Logger by Dave Mascaro <http://mysite.verizon.net/dmascaro1/>

In my opinion, VKCL Logger is the only option for VK contests. <http://web.aanet.com.au/~mnnds/> is the website for downloading the program. N1MM and Writelog are well known and proven loggers for the international contests. I have a preference for N1MM logger probably because the look and feel suits me and it is easy to setup. N1MM is certainly a complex and well written masterpiece in my opinion.

The following picture is a screen shot of the VKCL logger.



Once the contest is selected from the setup window this screen appears. The big white area is the 'logbook' and along the bottom are the entry windows. Remembering the call example above, when you hear the stations call sign it is typed into the call sign box and press Enter to take you into the received exchange box and type the number given. Pressing Enter again logs the contact and clears the entry boxes ready for the next entry. After the contest, click on 'View Log' and save the log book to a file. This file is then sent to the relevant email address as an attachment. This information is found in the rules of the contest sheet. Remember that there is a help icon in the program window which will explain how to use the logger. I have merely given a brief description here.

Notice the version number in the title bar. V2.19. Always check the website to see if there is a later version. If there is, download and install over the top of the existing one.

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### Operating Principles.

So far we have looked at the basics and given a general idea on the format of contesting and are assuming the equipment used for the contest is your shack as it is now.

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 headsets are the preferred choice of contestants. Two types of microphone insert are available and a choice of three different headsets is available. These are not that cheap, especially the pro-set. Once again the top of the range is aimed at the professional contesteer with noise 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.

### 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. Sometimes a call can be miss-logged, so it is a good idea to have a scrap pad next to you to make quick notes and fix the log after the contest.

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

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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

Decide on the method of logging

Update your software if using a logging program

Headset is at the ready

Foot switch is connected or you are working VOX.

How to log each call in the logger

How to save the log file

How to attach the log file to an email

Email the log to the contest manager even if you think it's not worth it. At least the log can be used as a check log.

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