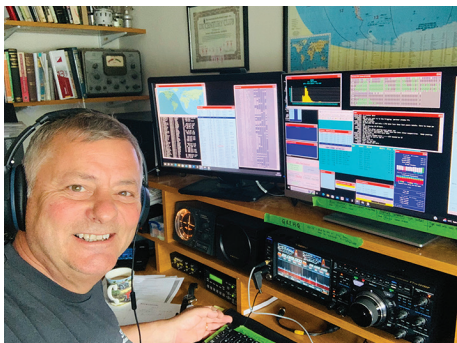# Contesting

PHOTO 1: Bob, GU4YOX/ MU5E in his shack.

Thanks to Nick, G4FAL for inviting me back as a guest columnist. In this article we will look at different aspects of SSB contesting.

Effective and enjoyable SSB contesting is not as easy as it might seem. It is mentally and physically demanding and needs a fitness, mind-set and range of skills which you might, or might not, naturally have. To assume 'I can speak therefore I can be a good SSB contester' is wrong – it is better to say 'I want to learn how to be a good SSB contester'.

Poor performance may be compounded by learning poor SSB contest operating habits at an early stage – possibly by listening to and mimicking operators you have met or heard on the air. Below, I have listed some of the personal characteristics that a contester should have. Many of these things apply to contesting in general and are not specific to SSB operating.

Let's break down what's needed to enjoy SSB contesting and be successful in 2024 and beyond…

Motivation
Without doubt, the most important factor, no matter how good or otherwise your station hardware, feeders and antennas are, is that if you are not competitively-minded, even in a casual way, you are unlikely to have success in the world of contesting. One major motivational factor is if you can operate some contests with a friend, or as part of a team. This is usually great fun, and you will hopefully learn a lot. Don't be afraid to admit to yourself at times 'that was bad operating'. Setting an ambitious goal before you start often helps.

PHOTO 2: Nick, G4FAL's LF vertical antenna.

It's easy to be highly motivated at the start of a contest, but not so easy in the last few hours of a long weekend, when motivation is needed most…

Learning
This is a progression – very few people start off as 'good' contesters. Many start off with easy 80m contests like the RSGB 80m SSB CCs, before moving on to international events. Here are what I think are key character traits…

1. Ability to listen to advice, to understand whether this advice is good or bad, then to put the good advice into practice during a contest.
2. A good memory – remember what worked well in your last contest and do the same again, or improve on that. Notes made during the contest can be a great help.
3. Don't allow initial poor scores to put you off contesting for good. Everyone usually has to start with poor results, then watch them improve with experience.
4. Perseverance – a good contester perseveres with CQing etc but only for long enough to be sure that, if no one is responding, they should try something different such as change frequency, move to another band, go looking for new multipliers etc. Almost any change will keep some QSOs being logged instead of none. Experience will help in getting the right balance.
5. Determination – keep going in adverse circumstances (QRM, splatter, QRN,

PHOTO 3: Nick G4FAL's shack.

attempts at stealing 'your' frequency etc). Ask yourself 'is this stopping me working stations or reducing my QSO rate significantly?' If the answer is yes, then changing frequency is usually the best solution – even to a different band. 'Frequency fights' are inevitable in HF contesting, so don't let them stress you too much. Conversely, don't give up your CQ frequency too easily. One amusing incident from a past CQ WW SSB contest was when a TM2 station suddenly started CQing on my 20m frequency. I pointed out that I had been there for hours. The reply was "we have plenty of fresh operators in our shack so we are not moving!" I'll leave you to guess what I said in response to that (politely of course).

Having said this, propagation does change so it is not impossible, for example on the 20m band, for stations with beam antennas in different parts of the world to actually be on the same frequency. It is worth bearing this in mind.

Key point 1
Know when to persevere with QRM etc, or when to move on quickly.

Logging software for SSB contesting
It is understandable that most contesters have their favourite contest logging software. They may defend any deficiencies that it has and tell you that their choice is the best. However, it's important to keep an open mind about contest logging software.

The reality is that your contest results really should not depend on what software you are using, except when you don't spend any time before the contest learning how to use the software properly.

Key point 2
Choose a contest logging package then become completely familiar with it in low-key contests before using it in a major

PHOTO 4: The G4FAL HF Yagi at 80ft (24.4m).

event. Good software should (a) be fast and ergonomically friendly, (b) make it easy it to identify a needed multiplier quickly, (c) need only a few keystokes/ mouse clicks for all vital tasks, and (d) display all vital information clearly, etc.

Hardware for SSB Contesting

It is very important that your contest shack provides an environment that is suitable for long periods of sitting and talking. Here are some of the main points to consider:

1. Comfortable seating – possibly an office swivel chair with adjustable height and back support.
2. Comfortable lighting – ideally filtered sunlight during the day and bright (but not too bright) light during the night.
3. Comfortable temperatures with good ventilation to keep you as alert as possible for long periods.
4. Well positioned radios/ amplifiers/ keyboards/ monitors etc to make tuning, logging etc easier and reduce fatigue.
5. A headset with a boom mic (never use a hand mic or desk mic). Check that the headset is not too heavy or uncomfortable to wear over a long period of time. Avoid using VOX to change to transmit – a footswitch gives you much more control over the timing of T/R changeovers.

A voice keyer (DVK) is an essential addition for SSB contesting. This can be an external unit, built into your transceiver, or using the PC sound card or other interface which has a sound card. Using your DVK for intermittent CQing gives your voice a brief rest and allows you to drink coffee etc.

It is worth checking the quality of your transmitted SSB signal with another station – no muffled audio, processing – but not too much, no Hi-Fi quality, no unwanted switching clicks or pops etc. Please record *your* voice, for your operating. It can cause confusion to your QSO partner when you reply after CQing with someone else's voice!

PHOTO 5: G4FAL's homebrew 9-element 2m Yagi.

SSB contest operating techniques

Most of us move into contesting from making day-to-day QSOs, where how long a QSO takes to complete is usually not too important. This means that most operators have to 'unlearn' what they say into the microphone and adopt much briefer operating habits. Some operators find this change difficult, if not impossible.

Key point 3

Use the minimum number of words to quickly and accurately complete the QSO. Establish a rhythm to making QSOs.

Here is an example of poor SSB operating technique (I heard this on the air recently in a pile-up for the EA5LC station).

1. UK station: CQ CQ CQ Gxxxx
2. UK station: Is there an EA station calling? Caller: EA5LC
3. UK station: Who is the EA5 station? Caller: EA5LC
4. UK station: Echo Alpha Five Lima something? Caller: EA5LC
5. UK station: Please confirm EA5LC? Caller: Yes

Terrible! A good operator would have sent the exchange after stage one or two at the most – much more efficient and speedy – like this…

1. UK station: CQ Gxxxx Pile-up: xxxEA5xxx
2. UK station: EA5 59 14. Caller: EA5KP 59 14
3. UK station: EA5KP thanks

At stage 3 you might consider just saying 'Kilo Papa' since you know the prefix, but confirming that you have the full callsign is probably better. Incidentally, raising the pitch of your voice slightly at the end of an over can imply a question and save time.

Accuracy of copying information, and also logging it accurately, is essential. If you are unsure, just ask the other station to repeat your report. Don't guess anything.

Try to think about whether or not your diction and enunciation are clear. Listen to others in contests – see what works and what doesn't. Use phonetics almost always for callsigns, and use standard 'hard' phonetics that are universally understood and get through when signals are weak or lost in the QRM.

Key point 4

If you have a pile-up calling, if possible, you should always reply immediately to one station – even one partial callsign if you don't get its full callsign the first time. Nine times out of ten the caller will respond immediately with their full callsign and your contest report (remember: in HF contests no-one cares about the actual signal strength so always send '59').

Other useful skills

There are a number of 'background' skills which you can learn, or you might already have, which will help improve your contest scores…

1. Knowing how to operate your transceiver and other station equipment to maximise its performance eg when to use Rx attenuation etc.
2. Knowledge of band propagation. This is a mix of experience, knowledge of where a band might be open to at any time, information from online propagation sites, the DX Cluster, RBN network, etc.
3. Knowing when to change from running a pileup to searching for multipliers – either when assisted or when unassisted.
4. Knowledge of callsign prefixes for DXCC entities, and which Zone (CQ or ITU) that station might be in.
5. Knowledge of beam headings for many DXCC entities.

Finally, operating in an SSB contest should be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, even if it feels to you like the opposite for the first few events!

Contest of the month: UK/EI DX SSB Contest

This contest runs from 1200UTC on 31 August to 1200UTC on 1 September 2024. The rules are available at:
rsgbcc.org/hf/rules/2024/ukeidxssb.shtml

Chris Tran, GM3WOJ
radcom@rsgborg.uk