



Second Century

Contesting Crisis

When I was 16 years old, one of my mentors, Doug Zwiebel, KR2Q, took me to where he contested from in Tuxedo Park, New York, at the superstation of Buz Reeves, K2GL (SK). After we were admitted through the security checkpoint, Doug drove forward a bit, stopped the car, then told me something I've never forgotten: "After today, you will never look at ham radio the same again." And he was right. Seeing the station with more than a dozen towers, and rotatable antennas on 10 through 80 meters, I was hypnotized. Inside the station were top radios and amplifiers from many brands. And during contests? The best operators in the world. Never — ever — was there a discussion of cheating, or taking shortcuts, or finding loopholes. If we won, we won. And we did — many times. If we lost? Lots of grumping that carried over into Sunday night dinner, and discussions about what could be done to help us do better next time.

The social media feeds and club reflectors have been on fire since the running of the 2026 World Radio Team Competition (WRTC) in the UK in July. To make a long story short, people close to the competition saw what they thought were irregularities in the scores. Once the judges did a deep dive into the logs, it turned out that yes, four teams had committed various forms of cheating and were disqualified. As a result, there have been thousands of messages posted about how horrible contesting has become, what life sentence should be handed down for these criminal acts, and that amateur radio will never be the same again!

Relax. Cheating is wrong, and it shouldn't happen. But it does happen. How we deal with cheating is important. It's not nearly as bad as you might think. It's actually worse. It's just that contests use incidents like these to evolve. And amateur radio, especially contesting, goes on. I could write — at length — all the cases of cheating in Radiosport (contesting and awards) that I have seen or been made aware of. From the big-time tester who, in the last few minutes of his hour on 80 meters, worked five VE multipliers before going to 160 meters — unassisted, to the European stations running huge amplifiers during contests where they are some 20 dB louder than the rest of the pileup. To the RTTY fanatic in your club who "works the club roster" during the contest — whether those members were on the air or not. To those who consider DXCC to be an award that is "in the eye of the beholder," meaning if you cheated to earn it, it will mean something different to you than to someone who played by the rules.

The rules. If you look at Radiosport over the years, you'll see that the rules change. They evolve. If there is a loophole that certain people in the contest commu-

nity have decided they don't like, they move to change the rules. If they like the development, they move to change the rules. And yet, even with this flexibility, there will always be those who will look and decide where the rules can be bent, where they should be broken, or where loopholes exist. Is this part of contesting evolution? Will we see a day where rules will be created to permit the use of remote SDRs, the creation of an "Unrestricted" Category, the inclusion of AI operators, or other shifts in technology that might be used to make contesting "more competitive"? We'll see.

I love contesting. I always have. I love seeing serious stations continue to evolve and strive for those few extra dB on transmit or receive to give them an edge — an edge that is earned, not one that comes from bigger amplifiers or made-up contacts — and then share their learning in places like Contest University for others to try. It is unfortunate that WRTC had to deal with this matter during such a prestigious event. But it should come as no surprise. We learn, we change, and we move on. We might expect to see new rules and new adjudication capabilities in the 2030 WRTC.

One thing dedicated testers need is people to contact! Be radio active! Get on the air, if only for an hour, and give out some points. Be a connector. Get friends in your local club or Facebook group to do the same. The winter months in the northern hemisphere means DX contesting! See you in the pileups.

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