

**Contest Advisory Committee
Semi-Annual Report**

**For the American Radio Relay League
Board of Directors Meeting**

July 2005

Submitted by

**Joe Staples, W5ASP
Chairman, CAC**

Earlier this year the CAC was asked by the Program & Services Committee to review the Final Report of the Ad Hoc VHF/UHF Study Committee, and to comment on those aspects of the report which were pertinent to contesting. As the report was quite extensive and addressed a broad spectrum of matters related to VHF/UHF activities, the CAC agreed to focus on a set of five topics which pertained to possible rule changes for the VHF Sweepstakes and QSO Parties.

The results of this review were summarized in a report which was submitted to the CAC Board Liaison. This report contains the composite results of the CAC's conclusions. This response from the individual CAC members was in the form of a Yes/No vote for each of the suggested actions. Although the results were slightly varied, the overall response clearly indicated that the CAC positively supported each of the recommended additions. A copy of this report is appended.

Since the meeting of CAC members who attended the Dayton Convention in May 2004, there has been an ongoing discussion of a group of ideas relating to the creation of a set of Guidelines for Contesters. Ward Silver, N0AX, has been guiding this exchange of ideas. A preliminary summary of the resulting suggestions was sent to the P&SC for their initial comments.

Subsequently, a draft version of these guidelines has been circulated among several other contest administrator groups for their comments. Their response is currently being compiled. Following a final internal review by the CAC the suggested guidelines will be passed on to the P&SC. The intent is to have this information posted on select websites and thus made available to all amateurs with an interest in contest activities.

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To: Ned Stearns, AA7A
CAC Board Liaison
From: Joe Staples, W5ASP
CAC Chairman
Subject: VHF/UHF Report

The CAC was asked by the Program and Services Committee to review the Final Report of the Ad Hoc VHF/UHF Study Committee, and to comment on those aspects of the report which were pertinent to contesting. As the report is quite extensive and addresses a broad spectrum of matters related to VHF/UHF activities, the CAC agreed to focus on a set of five topics which pertain to possible rule changes for the VHF Seepstakes and QSO Parties.

Summarized below are the composite results of the CAC's discussions. Note that the response requested from the individual CAC members was to be in the form of a Yes/No vote for the suggested action. A selection of pertinent comments is included in the attached Addendum.

1 - Establish a new Limited Single Operator category designed with the newcomer in mind. Operate on no more than four bands with low power only.

Yes - (12 For, 1 Against)

2 - Simplify the limit for low power operation to 150w for 50-144-222-432 MHz.

Yes – (8 For, 5 Against)

3 - Eliminate the rules that allow Multi-Operator stations to work their own operators on 2.3G and up.

Yes – (11 For, 2 Against)

4 - Strengthen the rules to minimize the rover practices known as grid circling and captive rovers.

Yes – (11 For, 2 Against)

5 - Offer sponsored plaques for the January and September contests, in addition to June. Non-sponsored plaques shall be available at cost.

Yes – (11 For, 2 Against)

It should be pointed out that not all replies were a simple Yes or No. In a number of instances the responding member expressed certain reservations or conditions to his position. Hence the above results are a simplification of the overall response, but do clearly indicate that the CAC positively supports each of these suggestions.

Also worth noting is the effort by various CAC members who solicited input from active VHF/UHF groups in their Divisions. Among those groups responding were the Yankee Clipper Contest Club, the Northern Lights Radio Society, the Rochester VHF Group, the Rochester DX Association, Pacific NW VHF Society, and a group of Central Division VHF/UHFers.

Finally Item 4 regarding certain rover practices involving grid circling and captive rovers drew the most detailed discussion. Obviously these issues involved merit further attention.

Attached is limited collection of various comments that may be of interest.

Addendum to CAC Comments on VHF/UHF Study

Specific Comments

1 - Establish a new Limited Single Operator category designed with the newcomer in mind. Operate on no more than four bands with low power only.

No, but I could be swayed to yes if someone can provide data that shows that adding rookie categories significantly increases participation in a contest. If a newcomer category were added, the rules would need to be clear as to who was a newcomer. A newcomer to VHF/UHF contesting? Or a newcomer to contesting?

My personal opinion is that it should be 50/144/432 specifically because this is the popular combo of most of the JA radios, but I can accept "four bands".

I would have suggested a beginner class limited to just 6 & 2M considering so many all band HF xcvr's now provide both 6 and 2 meter capability.

Suggest adding an optional "assisted" category to this. An "assisted" category currently does not exist for the ARRL VHF Contests. Many VHF "newcomers" hang out on the Internet ham chat pages such as the "Prop. Logger at DX World," W4TRH's "Dxers.info," "Ping Jockey," and ON4ANT's VHF Chat pages. They could receive on-line real time "mentoring" and encouragement during the VHF contest via one of these chat pages.

2. - Simplify the limit for low power operation to 150w for 50-144-222-432 MHz.

I like 100W as a low power limit, although I recall there was a CAC-reflector posting last year stating that 100W was not a reasonable VHF/UHF power limit. The advantage of 100W is that it is a limit that most can reasonably achieve. If the contesteer's rig is capable of more, it can be adjusted down to 100W.

The current participants don't seem to think the rule is broke so why fix it just to align with HF practice? HF and VHF are different in terms of available gear. Many VHF/UHF radios are only 10W-25W so solid state bricks ARE popular. The most popular size seems to be 170W for some reason. This seems like "micro-managing" to me.

Most of the HF + VHF radios now in widespread use are 100w on 6 and 2M. Off the shelf amps for 222 and 432 MHz are usually 100w. Going to 100 watts for VHF low power operation would be consistent with the HF contest rules. The current VHF 200w low power limit (and even 150w) has and will tempt some ops to use the T.E. Systems 300w solid state amps on 6 and 2M to "get to" 150 or 200w.

The limit should be consistent on these bands. There was plenty of discussion on either side (100 or 150) and I don't have enough background to know how much the other concerns will affect actual operation.

3 - Eliminate the rules that allow Multi-Operator stations to work their own operators on 2.3G and up.

I like a rule that states that an operator can operate under only one call sign during a contest.

I cannot envision a case how this can rule can be justified given the potential for abuse.

I suggest retaining the rule but raising the allowed bands to 24 GHz and up. Original rule was intended to stimulate activity at and above 2.3 GHz because equipment was not commonly available, etc. The situation is different now. The "hard" bands start at 24 GHz now. I still think having the incentive to build stuff for the higher bands is worthwhile.

4 - Strengthen the rules to minimize the rover practices known as grid circling and captive rovers.

While I understand the backlash against grid circling, I don't think it should be outlawed. Classic roving, where a rover moves from grid to grid and works a series of fixed stations, is not a very rewarding activity in the Western US. VHF/UHF contesting in the West is much different than in the East where the population density and historical interest in VHF/UHF leads to greater participation. The grid circling concept has provided the motivation (potential for very high scores) for roving in the Western US. This makes more grid squares available in a contest -- a good thing. I believe the solution is to have separate classes for classic roving (rover-fixed QSOs) and "grid circling" roving.

I want to split my response into two parts. With regards to grid circling: NO - I am a firm believer in most things that those who came before us generally know what they're doing. A lot of work was put into the current rover rules by people who know a lot more about than we do, yet grid circling was an unanticipated consequence of those rules. The objection to grid circling is mostly a matter of degree. Most people would not find objectionable a few QSOs between rovers. I'm afraid that rules to absolutely rule out grid circling will stop the casual QSOs and kill roving in areas like where I live where VHF/UHF operation is fairly sparse. On the subject of captive rovers, I would answer YES but I don't know how you can prevent it other than some really obnoxious rule about it being unethical.

The discussion of these two issues should be lead by those on the CAC who have first-hand knowledge and experience. I cannot offer an informed opinion on these issues at this time.

These must first be defined.

Captive Rovers

Def: Rovers submitting a log in which 90% or more of the contacts are with a single station. (Lower percentages may affect legitimate rovers in low-population areas.)

There are rovers that are "planned captives" and "accidental captives". Big MO's that encourage new operators to get on by giving them hardware and turning 'em loose should be encouraged to do so. These guys sometimes fail to hear anybody else or aren't experienced enough to make a serious effort. I would not be opposed to a one-time exemption for a first-time entrant. The drawback is that it requires tracking these exemptions from year to year which is more work, something we're supposed to be avoiding. It might be easier to key some kind of scoring limit based on whether 50% or more of a rover's contacts were with the same station. It might also be possible to limit the number of contacts accepted in an MO's log with captive rovers to some overall fraction of the total contacts (and grids?).

Grid Circling

Def: Sequences of contacts between rovers in which multiple contacts are made in less than 15 minutes between the same two stations in more than two grids.

We need to not discourage random rover encounters, thus the "more than two grids" wording. Time limits and minimum distances would help, but wouldn't really discourage the practice, just put a cap on it. We could also decide that this is just an evolutionary event and make a new category called Unlimited Rover in which grid circling is allowed. Disallow Unlimited Rover scores in any club total. That would put a natural brake on it in populated areas where club competition is more vigorous, pushing more activity to the traditional Limited Rover. Unlimited Rovers could compete against each other nationally, since the effects of population are muted (not eliminated). This might, in fact, be the only VHF+ category that could be considered a national category.

5 - Offer sponsored plaques for the January and September contests, in addition to June. Non-sponsored plaques shall be available at cost.

Plaques offer tangible incentive for both participation and achievement and should be offered for all three ARRL VHF/UHF events. Sponsors should be solicited by the Contest Manager as done for other events. Ideally awards will be offered by ARRL Division or other geographical units.

Sponsors are just not stepping up to sponsor plaques. The idea of buying your own plaque has always seemed kinda wierd. The whole plaque program has been devalued in my opinion because there are too many of them. Let's stay with certificates, make them attractive, get them out quickly and accurately, and be happy. If anyone anywhere wants to sponsor a plaque, we should publicize the pants off of it and provide the necessary data. Let the natural creativity of the clubs and individuals take over.

Survey Results

Most of the responses came from the **Yankee Clipper Contest Club** (YCCC), the largest contest club in New England. The study was posted on the YCCC website and the survey was posted on the YCCC reflector. I received comments from 15 individuals, 12 of whom also voted on the survey. The survey votes break down as follows:

Question	YES	NO	ABSTAIN
1	12	0	
2	11	1	
3	7	5	
4	7	5	2
5	11	1	

Response from the **Northern Lights Radio Society** (NLRS)

1 - Establish a new Limited Single Operator category designed with the newcomer in mind. Operate on no more than four bands with low power only.

NLRS: All 15 said Yes. Supported.

2 - Simplify the limit for low power operation to 150w for 50-144-222-432 MHz.

NLRS: 14 Yes, 1 No. Supported.

3 - Eliminate the rules that allow Multi-Operator stations to work their own operators on 2.3G and up.

NLRS: 7 Yes, 8 No. The most polarizing question for us. Not supported. The primary reason given for the No votes was that the current rule has the potential to help generate activity and provides emphasis to get on those more difficult microwave bands (2304 and up). One thing that makes VHF/UHF contest rules a bit different from HF contest rules is that in part they are intended to generate activity through the exploration of the UHF/microwave bands. As an observation, the NLRS tends to support any ruling that promotes activity and microwave activity. With this rule there is only up side and little or no harm.

4 - Strengthen the rules to minimize the rover practices known as grid circling and captive rovers.

NLRS: 12 Yes, 3 No. Supported. However we would NOT support any ruling that takes away random rover-to-rover contacts. For us, we kind of chuckle at this recent rover caravan activity. How boring to work the same one or two rovers a million times over and over again. Yes, huge scores can be generated and thus it threatens the nature of balance for club aggregate scoring, but outside of that the NLRS really doesn't see this as much of an issue for us the rover caravans will burn themselves out (because its just not that much fun). We don't grid circle here because it not very much fun.

5 - Offer sponsored plaques for the January and September contests, in addition to June. Non-sponsored plaques shall be available at cost.

NLRS: 11 Yes, 4 No. Supported. Geez, what about the August UHF too its not dead. Speaking of plaques, I can tell you that as President of the NLRS that for two years I have tried to find out from Dan Henderson what VHF contest plaques have not been sponsored so that NLRS can do so ... the club has the money, but we are unwilling to send Dan a check for a blind sponsorship. Its clear that "we" (the collective we) can do better with plaques and sponsorship.

I spoke to members of the Rochester VHF Group and the Rochester DX Association recently on the issues in front of us now. I got some interesting feedback,

Discussion:

(1) This proposal is popular with the masses and I see relatively little harm in it as long as it is properly implemented. I don't think it will rejuvenate VHF+ contesting to a significant degree, but if it promotes activity it's okay. However, it *must not* suppress development of higher-frequency capabilities by those who decide to go into this class. I think it should be significantly limited--it must be low-power only (which is part of the proposal) to encourage those who want to run power to also get on more bands. Anything that leaves people with five or six bands a choice of either going LP in a class where they might be able to win a certificate versus using all their bands is a bad thing. This robs other people of the chance to make these higher-frequency QSOs and can stifle the development of new bands in a region. This contest program should, as one of its core attributes, promote a sort of lifelong learning and progression of activity to higher frequencies and other achievements that will benefit the program in the way it's implemented. Changes like this must take that into account.

(2) No discussion.

(3) This has, for at least the last 15 years, been a source of "free" points for large multiops that further tilts their advantage in what I consider to be an unfair way--especially in January, when the points are doubled for microwave QSOs. I can remember participating in QSOs that give credit to multiops where there is simply no way the equipment used to work them could also be used to work anyone else. This currently legal practice abuses the intent of the rules and only benefits those with a lot of extra equipment lying around that can be handed out to operators with a battery and a picnic table in the immediate area. It has no legitimate purpose.

(4) This is an emphatic requirement from all those I've talked with about the issue and from me personally. I think that this practice has the potential to completely destroy the meaning of the rover category, as well as the contests themselves. The practical solution that has risen to the top of my preference for treating this ugly issue is this: Create a second rover category where anything goes. Within the remaining framework of the rules, that is. Call it Unlimited Rover. The legacy rover category (Classic Rover?) could then be more clearly defined as disallowing excessive rover-to-rover QSOs or those entries in which substantially only one station or other rover stations were worked. Hold the power in the legacy rover class to reclassify any entry that appears to violate the intent of these rules, in the contest sponsor's sole discretion. I'd like to call the legacy category "Real Rover." That clearly encapsulates the issue here. I have some ideas for names for the unlimited rover class, but none of them are suitable for a family reflector.

(5) This one was a yawner with the groups and with me personally. I don't think it will help or hurt, but I do think that it will be very difficult to find more plaque sponsors. And it creates administrative burden. But, whatever.

In new topics, these things bubbled up:

1) Bring back family rovers with shared equipment. (That is, multiple call signs with the same gear for rover entries.) Allow it only in the unlimited class. This is the result of some local situations in this area where families want to rove as a family activity and use multiple call signs with only one set of gear. Some of you may recall that this sort of abuse of the original rover rules led to the first revision of rover rules back about 15 years ago.

2) Not specific to VHF/UHF contests: Separate SO2R into two categories. When asked whether I thought this would ever happen (by someone hoping I would be sympathetic to this absurd concept), I stated emphatically "I certainly hope not." A long discussion ensued, with some people on both sides of the issue. No consensus, solutions or new discussion resulted.

3) At an RDXA meeting where I was the speaker (on the topics that we are currently discussing), one person claimed "There are just too many contests." This was actually quite humorous. I asked a few pointed questions:

a) Do you operate contests? "Yes."

b) Do you find that contests interfere with your regular non-contest operation because they occur on weekends? "No, I'm retired so I can operate anytime I want to."

c) Do contests affect your enjoyment of Amateur Radio in some other way? "No. I just think there are too many contests."

What does one say to logic like that? My response was, "Okaaaaay . . . next topic."

4) Contest-free zones and the WARC-79 bands came up. Nothing productive came of this discussion either. Apparently contesters and DXers themselves can't clearly figure out how contest operations should or should not explicitly make room for other Amateur Radio operating interests during contests. I pretty much stuck to the line that there are lots of places to operate any mode you choose even when contests are going on, so the best approach is to explore some of them. Some were satisfied by this and some were not. Pretty much what I expected.

General Comments

The idea of having a separate VHF+ working group without involving the CAC turned out to be awkward, although well-intended. In the future, if a new focus group's charter is to overlap with a standing committee, its creation should be coordinated with that committee.