

Observations From WRTC '96

by Tom Taormino, K5RC

I have been very fortunate to have been a part of ham radio contesting history during the last three decades. I have participated in the infamous SS multi-ops with K5LZO and helped set world records in ARRL DX from XE2FU. I was an organizer of The Great Armadillo Runs and was one of the architects of the North American QSO Party. In my two stints as Editor of *National Contest Journal* I reported on many other extraordinary efforts by scores of world-class operators. None of these events, to date, can compare to the one that I witnessed in the San Francisco Bay Area during July of 1996. The '96 World Radiosport Team Championship will, no doubt, take its place near the top in the annals of Contesting history.

The archetype for WRTC 96 was WRTC 90, held in Seattle during the International Goodwill Games. That event pioneered the gathering of world-class contesters to do battle in one geographic area, on a level playing field. For the first time, on an international scale, WRTC 90 removed equipment and location advantage and tested the raw talent of one operator against another. This event proved the feasibility of attracting the "big guns" from around the world to demonstrate their skills in contest strategy and execution. It opened a new dimension in contesting to those who would take the vision and develop its possibilities.

In keeping with the Olympic model, others who were motivated to build on WRTC 90 tossed about the idea of holding these events every four years. A serious attempt was launched in the Washington, DC area, but the sponsors acknowledged the incredible logistical effort required to stage such an event and gracefully withdrew their proposals.

I don't recall exactly when I received the first phone call from Rusty, W6OAT, about a potential effort being discussed to hold a WRTC event in the San Francisco Bay area. I do remember, however, that I had an uncomfortable feeling that I was about to be run over by a train. You see, in my thirty-plus year friendship with Rusty I have learned that there are very few times that such an inquiry turns out to be just idle chatter and speculation. The first conversation led to another in which Rusty polished his legal training and inquired "If there were such an event, would you be willing to be a judge?" I knew things were serious when I posed the question to my wife, Midge, KC5AFO. She said we could go only if

we could occupy our familiar spot in Rusty's guest room. His reply was that I2UIY already had dibs on that bed!

Soon after, there were a few Internet mail messages soliciting ideas about how teams might be selected, and about conducting the event during a scheduled contest to stimulate activity. All of a sudden, I had been included on an Internet list-server for WRTC Judges. In the weeks to come, the mail messages grew from one a week to one a day. My business travel schedule left little time for radio matters, but I felt the momentum grow and my adrenalin being channeled back into nearly dormant areas of my competitive self. I found myself making hotel reservations and scheduling west coast business travel during July, just as I had scheduled work around contests in years past. What was happening to me? Was I being coaxed from self-imposed retirement by forces emanating from the mysterious energy generator known as the Northern California Contest Club? The magnitude of what was about to happen was beginning to become apparent.

First, there were a few teams. Then there were twenty teams. Then, all of a sudden, there were 52 teams and more volunteers in the wings. The number 52 did not have much meaning until the incredible *coup de grace* was revealed that the WRTC group managed to go where no one had gone before in gaining agreement from the FCC to activate the 1x1 call sign block for the first time. The competitors would be signing W6A through W6Z and K6A through K6Z! Amazing! The only parallel I could draw from personal history is when I witnessed Governor Mark White of Texas sign the proclamation declaring "Armadillo County" to exist for ham radio purposes during the Texas Bicentennial Celebration.

In the last weeks before the event, I found myself agonizing over the rules and guidelines being updated once or twice each day by Chief Judge K4VX. I visualized, through the text on the Internet, the incredible logistical effort that was unfolding in the Bay area. I could see the momentum that follows like a tornado behind Rusty Epps, mingled with the vision of W6RGG and AI6V wearing out their telephones and vehicles attempting to find at least 52 stations with similar triband antennas at similar heights. On the surface, it would appear to be easy to tap the NCCC and NCDXC for such stations. But, these days, we contesters and DXers seldom

have antennas so modest! The 50-ft tribander has been relegated to casual operators and "little pistols" who would have to be drafted from the great masses of amateurs surrounding San Francisco Bay.

As I made my way to the West Coast, and left business imperatives behind for a few days, the magnitude of the event was beginning to hit me. However, it would not become a reality until I arrived. As soon as I installed the 2-meter radio in the rental car, I started to witness the massive efforts of shuttling competitors, judges, observers, and supporters to and from SFO airport. One of the first things I heard was "Oops, I missed G3SXW, does anyone have him in their car?" That was followed by AI6V making a plea for loaner radios and VCRs (we needed 52 VCRs to record the contest audio at each location to assist judging the logs).

The first "official" event was the meeting of the Judges on Tuesday evening. As I entered the borrowed conference room with AI6V, it first appeared to be just another fun gathering of old NCCC friends over pizza and beer. Then other stalwarts of hospitality-suites-of-old started filing in. First W7RM, then W0UN and N2AA. The awakening began for me when DX multipliers entered the room and became faces and names instead of "59914." I2UIY, PY5EG, S50A, JA7RHJ, OK2FD, and the "Voice of The Urals" UA9BA were soon consuming pizza, chicken wings, and some amazing "home brew" liquid (destined to cause hangovers on Wednesday!) provided by S50A. Twenty years ago, such a meeting would only have been a dream. Even 10 years ago, it would have been politically and logistically impossible to have all of these contesters in one room in Belmont, California. For the next three hours, we drank, laughed, and somehow managed to work out the details of the "final-final" operating rules.

On Wednesday, the main wave of competitors and observers arrived (there were 19 judges and 36 referees) for five days of parties, receptions, picnics, tours and, inevitably, 18 hours of contesting. I ducked out for a day of business activity and returned on Thursday afternoon to witness three full busloads of competitors leaving for a dinner party at a Shell Oil facility in the East Bay. The full impact of the event was not to hit, however, until the next morning.

The first indicator was in a small res-

restaurant with two waiters fighting off hordes of hungry contesters. Punching through the cries for service was the voice of I2UIY complaining that no one in the USA could make coffee strong enough to suit him! As I left the breakfast, JA7RHJ crawled into the room, looking (as we say in Texas) "rode hard and put up wet." He, reportedly, had been corrupted by the S50s as they "forced" him to drink their homebrew liquor.

The first meeting was for the Judges to brief the Referees on the nuances of the rules interpretations. It started an hour late because one team and two Referees were "no-shows." Unfortunately, RU3AA had been denied a passport until the last minute and there were no more plane connections available. In NCCC tradition, referees were found and the first alternate team of N2NT and KZ2S was given the go-ahead as competitors. In the midst of the conversations with W3ZZ, K6NA, and NB6G, it occurred to me to perform some simple math and scope the size of this event. There were 52 teams of two (104 bodies). There were 55 judges and referees. There were at least 12 committee members, plus exhibition teams, sponsors, TV crews, spouses, and helpers that brought the head count to well over 200 folks who paid their own way and/or sacrificed their summer vacation to be here! Another measure of size was that the Motel 6 had turned over the registration activities to AA6MC for the weekend!

As the Observers' meeting moved through its agenda, the competitors were growing restless. They were on the patio, visible through large glass doors. The scene was that of hungry sharks orbiting an unsuspecting prey. Finally, a 10-minute break was called so that the competitors could enter the room for one large strategy session and the all-important drawing for stations and call signs.

All of the indicators that I had toyed with until now finally manifested themselves in one room containing "The Best-of-the-Best" of contemporary contesters. There they were, the defending champs K1AR and K1DG surrounded by seasoned veterans such as K4BAI, PY5CC, OK1CF, VE7CC, K8CC, K5ZD, K7SS, W2GD, DJ6QT, and HA0MM. They were seated among the current "movers and shakers" like KM9P, WN4KKN, CT1BOH, KR2J, NP4Z, and WC4E. As questions were answered about subtle rules interpretations, I caught in my memory some video snippets and audio sound bites including: K4BAI scrupulously writing the key rules interpretations; K1ZZ handing out ITU Zone maps; WA7NIN vociferously making a point about a rule that was about to bend; N6AA making one of his patented "eclectic" judgement calls about an obscure rule; W7RM keeping



(L-r) Laurent Fontaine, F5MUX; John Devoldere, ON4UN; Gerard Parat, F6FGZ.

us from constantly disrupting the meeting by making sidebar comments; KK6QM relentlessly updating her printouts of who was where doing what to whom; and S59A and S56A translating subtle points for each another. The one comment that summed it all up was from an unknown voice that said, "I can't imagine having missed this event."

Finally the time arrived for the drawing. The mood was not unlike that of the Academy Awards with the anticipating candidates at the mercy of the dreaded "sealed envelope." Teams were called in alphabetical order. Each drew an envelope and the call sign of the assigned station and Judge or Referee was announced. Each observer joined his assigned team and was given the second sealed envelope with the 1×1 call sign enclosed (these were not to be opened or divulged until 30 minutes before the start of the contest). As the teams and observers were "mated," they moved outside to begin the process of learning each others' language and resolving who had a car, where the station was located, how it was equipped, whether there were food and sleeping facilities, how far away it was, and when everyone wanted to leave. As K3EST predicted in the meeting, organized chaos was about to result when all of the teams were matched and the scramble was on to gather food and equipment and head for the host stations.

Early on, I drew "Team France," F6FGZ and F5MUX. I would be their shadow and observer for the weekend. They would build their operating position with their own equipment, plus whatever the host would provide. I would make certain that the audio recorder was always on line and I'd listen through earphones to the 18 hours of operating. They were motivated to take advantage of every bit of strategy and luck available to them and I was compelled to quietly observe and ensure that the spirit of the rules was scrupulously followed.

Our group was a fine match. Gerry and Lee were not only very friendly and talented, but they liked to eat as much as I did, so we became fast friends. After

lunch, we navigated to our host station, W6VG. Ron's QTH was nestled in one of the birthplaces of modern electronics, Menlo Park. His home, ham shack, and hospitality were all we could have asked for, and then some. Ron and Helga made us extremely welcome. They helped the team with refreshments for our souls and connectors and patch cords to make the station operational. Helga had a knack for making pots of coffee appear in the ham shack without her presence being noticed.

Thirty minutes before the contest started (4:30 AM, local time) I pulled the magic envelope from my briefcase and we had a ceremony and photo opportunity as Gerry and Lee discovered they were to be W6K. Last-minute checks were made, WWV was dialed-up one more time, and the contest was on. I had no idea how difficult it would be to keep my big mouth shut and not suggest frequencies, beam directions, weird openings, and all of the tips, tricks and techniques that I had learned over the last 36 years. I would mentally complete broken calls while Lee asked for repeats. Normal multi-op behavior would be for me to yell the call and save precious time. In this assignment, I had to keep a poker face when they would forget to turn the beam as they attempted to work a multiplier. I desperately wanted to remind them to check 10 meters every half hour for sporadic-E openings, but I had to suppress the urge, no matter how strong. I bit my tongue when their strategy would be at odds with one I might have used, but I couldn't argue when they hit rates of 220 per hour on 15 CW and 120 per hour on 10 CW — in summer during the bottom of the sunspot cycle! In retrospect, my strategy may not have been any more effective than theirs, but it was difficult to keep from injecting comments in the heat of battle. It was also hard to control the urge to share anecdotes about some of the operators they were working, when I would otherwise have related some obscure story, interesting to only those who knew the operator involved. It also reminded me that many of the world's finest operators were not in San Francisco but on the other end of the pileup at their home or DXpedition locations. Even those contesters who were here and involved but not on a team (like K1ZZ, W6QHS, and AA6KX) found a station to operate to be fodder for the logs of the WRTC participants.

As the contest progressed, I had other apparitions appear. When I heard K1ZX/4, I envisioned Jim with checklists spread all over the living room floor as he attempted to sweep all 52 WRTC stations. The image was placed in my memory by his mother, W1YL, who told me that he

had maps of Texas spread all over the living room, tracking mobile stations during the Armadillo Run of 1983, when he managed to work all 256 Texas counties in one weekend. Each time KA9FOX called in, a sad picture was painted of very fine operators who might have been frustrated because they did not receive an invitation to participate in the WRTC, this time. The third image was how many W6 stations must have been active. The WRTC Board had made presentations to many of the local radio clubs in the area and received commitments for scores of casual operators to be active, especially if 10 meters never opened. When I factored in the publicity this event had received and the ham population of the area, I figured there must have been more ham RF radiated per square meter of real estate than ever before in the history of the hobby.

After the contest, we had a ceremonial toast (with California wine, of course), tore the station down, restored the host's equipment to its original condition, bid Ron and Helga farewell, and drove off into the night.

We were among the first to return to the hotel after the contest (midnight Saturday). In moments, it became the scene at the end of a grand prix race, where the competitors and officials gather in the winners' circle to exchange race stories. Car after car pulled in. Disquettes and video tapes were quickly

whisked off to N6AA's waiting computers in Room 101. After the official ritual was over, the patio became rumor central into the wee hours of the morning. The first bit of news was that N5RZ had made a sweep in 63 minutes! Claimed QSO totals ranged from 1800 to 2500, although no one was talking about "final score." There was one story after another about great hosts, great rates, huge pileups, and the RF curtain of W6 stations. There were amazing claims of who ran the CT and NA rate meters the highest (200+ on CW and 500+ on SSB). The final score didn't seem to matter to most as conversations revolved around the incredible rush of the competition and the sustained rates of 100 to 140 for 18 hours. My team was hoping for 1000 Qs and wound up with 2300! (When the packet network would spot them and a wall of stations called in at once, they would hold the headphones up to their video camera to document the event for history).

At noon Sunday, it began all over again at the poolside beer and pizza party. Station hosts and NCCC members joined the crowd until it grew to the size of a mini hamfest. Thanks and congratulations were toasted repeatedly, while most competitors kept an eye out for someone in a green "Judge" shirt who might have some rumors about the final results. The awards banquet would not arrive soon enough for those who had a

shot at dethroning the defending champs.

To me, the final results are not as important as some of the other statistics. All 52 WRTC stations and the two exhibition stations were active for the event. Eighteen non-WRTC stations won WRTC Plaques; 334 operators worked all 52 WRTC stations; 303 stations made at least 102 QSOs with WRTC stations and an amazing 1702 different ops worked at least 10 WRTC stations! The top WRTC Station QSO total in California was 390 by W6QHS who was beaten overall by N5RZ with 373! Oh yes, one other interesting statistic: The WRTC Teams made a total of 109,000 QSOs of which 70% were on CW.

Another conversation overheard in every corner of the hotel was centered around "What do we do to top this?" Suggestions ranged from field-day-type stations on the beaches of a Caribbean island to a similar event in Europe or on the East Coast of the USA. Other suggestions had stations surrounding the deck a cruise ship with competitors attempting to work around each others' QRM. Whoever volunteers to sponsor and run such an event will have an incredible model to build from and an awesome task to top the consummate excellence of WRTC 96.

A final postscript, as one competitor so eloquently put it, "I've got to have me one of them 1x1 call signs..." ■