

# The Truth About Contesters

Is it the hardware or the humanity that keeps the top competitors going? This year's World Radiosport Team Championship offered a rare, personal glimpse into their world.

**N**onhams think it's true of all hams. Hams in general suspect it's true of contesters. Casual contesters are sure it's true of top-notch contesters.

But last July, 150 of the world's best Amateur Radio contesters disproved the common belief that they're more interested in antennas and amplifiers than in meaningful human interaction. They came to one place from every continent on earth—and why? Not to show that they could score the most points, but to meet each other, to deepen in person the friendships they had formed on the air.

The World Radiosport Team Championship (WRTC) was first held in Seattle in 1990 in conjunction with the Goodwill Games (see *QST*, Oct 1990, p 43). Unlike other Amateur Radio contests, where operators strive to find the best locations and put up the best antennas, WRTC is carefully designed to minimize station equipment and location advantages. In this contest, the major variable is the skill of the two-person teams. Who can best analyze propagation conditions to be on the right band pointing in the right direction at the right time? Who can best catch call signs in the pileups? Who can make and log contacts most efficiently?

All teams were limited to 40 through 10 meters this year. To make their signals comparable, WRTC teams all run 100 W output into triband Yagis on the higher bands and dipoles on 40 meters. And to provide comparable propagation conditions, they all operate from the same geographical area.

One hot topic of discussion was the contest call signs. Thanks to the efforts of the ARRL, the FCC issued 52 one-by-one call signs for WRTC-96. Using K6A through K6Z and W6A through W6Z, the contest teams attracted a lot of attention during their 18 hours on the air, adding to the excitement of the event.

Thus it was that hams from Australia and Argentina, Brazil and Bulgaria, Croatia and Canada, and two dozen other countries gathered in the San Francisco Bay Area last July for a week of social events, contest preparation, and the 18 hours of the second World Radiosport Team Championship itself.

Time and again, as I asked participants why they had come so far to be part of WRTC-96, their answers were not about points, but about people. This motivation became evident during the very first WRTC gathering, a barbecue at beautiful Coyote Point Park in San Mateo, California. As 747s arriving from Asia and Europe de-

scended toward nearby San Francisco International Airport, WRTC competitors, judges, referees, station hosts, committee members, sponsors, and guests enjoyed traditional western US fare (ribs, chili, tortilla chips) while chatting under tall eucalyptus trees.

Hams who hadn't seen each other in a long time renewed their acquaintances, those who knew each other from years of contesting but had never met in person greeted each other buoyantly, and everyone took the opportunity to turn strangers into new friends during this United Nations-style gathering.

From the four corners of the world, the competitors' reasons for coming to WRTC-96 were strikingly similar:

Krasmar "Krassy" Petkov, LZ1SA, Bulgaria: "To see these people in person is amazing." Bernd Laenger, DL1VJ, Germany: "For me, the most important thing is the social aspect. You meet a lot of people." Gerard "Gerry" Parat, F6FGZ, France: "For the fun!" Arturo Gargarella, LU6ETB, Argentina: "Competition, and to meet everybody here. It's a dream for us to meet the people we work in contests."

Ognyan "Ogy" Tzvetanov LZ2PO, Bulgaria: "I was in WRTC in Seattle [in 1990],



WRTC referee Gene Zimmerman, W3ZZ (left), and competitor Harry Booklan, ON9CIB/RA3AUU (right), relax at a post-contest pool party.



WRTC competitors Pat Barkey, WA8YVR (left), and Randy Thompson, K5ZD (right), compare notes and war stories.

and this is the best thing that's happened in six years." Laurent "Lee" Fontaine, F5MUX, France: "To represent France and to meet a lot of people." Jan-Eric Rehn, SM3CER, Sweden, gesturing to all the animated conversations going on at the barbecue: "This is the best part." Gyozi Macsuga, HA0MM, Hungary: "Meeting people—and the score!"

According to Meng "Jerry" Chao, BA1FB, who participated as a referee, the Chinese exhibition team also came to WRTC primarily "to meet the people. We've worked them, but not met them." Wang Xinmin, BA1OK, also noted that because Amateur Radio has not been permitted in China for long, Chinese hams have not had much opportunity to hone their contesting skills. Therefore Wang and his teammate Chen Fang, BA4RC, very much appreciated the chance that WRTC gave them to learn from seasoned contesters.

Both Trey Garlough, WN4KKN, and Dick Frey, K4XU, likened WRTC to major league baseball's All-Star Game. Why? "It's more like an exhibition than a competition," said Trey. "The social aspect of the event is the highlight, not the actual contest. To have all these folks gathered together in one place is truly awesome."

Acknowledging the personal bridges that Amateur Radio can build between countries, Melissa Sawkins, VE7MMI, wife of Canadian competitor Lee Sawkins, VE7CC, may have best captured the benefits of WRTC when she said, "I think the more that people can get together this way, the less the politicians can screw things up."

Her sentiments were echoed by ARRL Executive Vice President Dave Sumner, K1ZZ. Noting that the League had donated \$5000 to WRTC-96 from the Colvin Award Fund established in memory of Lloyd Colvin, W6KG, Dave said, "WRTC embodies the spirit of international goodwill" that the Colvin award is designed to encourage.

All these expressions of friendship and harmony should not, however, be taken to mean that everyone came just for the parties. Many competitors were eager to go up against their comrades in a situation where station setups and locations were not significant factors. After all, these hams got invited to WRTC in the first place because of their outstanding performance in previous Amateur Radio contests.

As referee Stan Griffiths, W7NI, remarked wryly, "At the precontest meeting of the competitors, judges, and referees, we had more ego per square foot than I've ever seen." Veteran competitor John Devoldere, ON4UN, observed that "the contest isn't so important to me. But if the young guys say that, don't believe them!" Another skeptic noted, "Just wait till 5 AM Saturday [the start time of the contest] and see if they still feel that way!"

### Unsung Heroes

Station hosts were the behind-the-scenes heroes of WRTC. Whether they invited teams to club stations or, as in most



Danny Eskenazi, K7SS, who chaired the first World Radiosport Team Championship in 1990, participated this time as a contestant—after first taking time to have everyone sign his sweatshirt.

cases, to their own homes, these hams and their families truly demonstrated the spirit of Amateur Radio.

Because the contest began at 5 AM (coinciding with the annual IARU HF World Championship), station hosts were up all or most of the previous night welcoming their guests and making sure all the necessary equipment was ready. They then spent the 18 hours of the contest providing food, coffee, and encouragement.

German hams Stefan von Baltz, DL1IAO, and Roland Mensch, DK3GI, operated from the home of Al Maenchen, AD6E. Stefan's succinct review: "Good host, good cooking!" He went on to say, "Al will tell you that we were eating and eating and not working stations"—but this claim is belied by the nearly 2000 QSOs that Stefan and Roland made during the contest.

Canadian referee Dale Green, VE7SV, and Team South Africa spent WRTC at the home of Jim (KV6S) and Fran Moyer in Cupertino. Dale declared, "I'd like to nominate them for hosts of the year. First they wanted to know what kind of beer we liked. Then they made a run to Starbucks and asked what kind of coffee we wanted."

Team South Africa consisted of Jan van Niekerk, ZS6NW, and Chris Burger, ZS6EZ. Jan said, "We sort of reorganized Jim's whole station and he didn't mind. When Chris' throat got sore, Fran mothered him with tea with honey and lemon juice. If you're a stranger in a place and you experience outstanding hospitality, it's wonderful. Somehow ham radio people seem to always do that. It was an incredible experience and one I'll never forget."

Like the competitors themselves, station hosts had a variety of reasons for participating in WRTC.

Stan Kuhl, K6MA, expressed common themes when he said before the contest that

he wanted "to see how my station compares to other people's" by having top-notch contesters use it, and "to meet in person a lot of people I've met on the air over the years." Stan also noted that WRTC provided "the opportunity to clean out the shack a little bit"—an incentive that many of us can appreciate!

Jerry Bliss, K6SMH, who hosted one of the Japanese teams, got excited about WRTC-96 as soon as he heard about it. "Immediately I wanted to participate. I even put up a tower and antenna for it."

Similar enthusiasm was expressed by Jim Golden, K6LM, who played host to a Polish team. "I didn't want to be left out. And it was obvious that I had exactly [the station setup] WRTC wanted." Jim sounded like a proud father when he reported that "My team showed up on 40 meters near the end of the contest and worked 75 QSOs in 15 minutes!"

Fred Canham, K6YT, belongs to the Palo Alto Amateur Radio Association. As Fred noted, promoting Amateur Radio is part of PAARA's charter, so the club offered its Field Day site on the shores of San Francisco Bay to WRTC organizers and left its temporary tribander up after Field Day. (Because the site is at a boat-repair facility, there was easy access to ac power for WRTC operations.) A number of other local independent, corporate, and college Amateur Radio clubs also hosted WRTC teams.

Of course, having world-class contesters operating your station *can* have a downside. Al Maenchen, AD6E, noted ruefully, "The bad part is that now I have no excuse for not making high scores myself. For years I've been blaming my location, but now I know that isn't the problem!"

Also playing an invaluable part in making WRTC successful were the judges and referees who were on site at each station to observe the teams and ensure compliance with all the rules. Jan van Niekerk typified the response of WRTC competitors when he noted that although referee Dale Green was careful not to interfere with Team South Africa, he was very supportive during the entire contest.

After the contest ended at 11 PM local time Saturday night and everyone headed back to WRTC headquarters at a Belmont motel, the judges still had lots of work ahead of them. While other WRTC participants were sleeping or enjoying the motel's pool, the judges, headed by ARRL Midwest Division Director Lou Gordon, K4VX, were poring over the logs. They spent nearly 18 straight hours at the task in order to have the results ready and the plaques engraved in time for the Sunday evening awards banquet.

Also lending their support to the WRTC effort were a number of hams who came from as far away as Slovenia and Croatia just to cheer on their friends and enjoy WRTC's social aspects.

Ann Judson, KC7RN, worked on the Goodwill Games in 1990 but was too busy to participate in the first WRTC. After she saw the video of that contest, she decided



Bernd Laenger, DL1VJ (left), John Devoldere, ON4UN (right), eagerly read the results as soon as they're posted.



The championship is over and the competitors are still friendly. Akira Asai, JA8RWU/KH2V (left), and Stan Stockton, K5GO (right), share a light moment.

that she wanted to participate in any way she could this time, so she came down to the Bay Area to enjoy WRTC week.

Zeljko Klason, 9A2DQ, is part of the 9A1A contest club in Croatia, which had members on two WRTC teams. Zeljko came "to put faces on call signs...to meet friends."

Andy Ponzini, VE7AHA, traveled to the Bay Area from British Columbia and operated mobile from Coyote Point Park for 11 hours of the contest ("until they kicked me out"). Andy easily achieved his goal of working all of the WRTC stations.

Which brings up the point that the other vital participants in WRTC were the thousands of hams who took time to make contact with the competitors. Response to the contest exceeded organizers' expectations, with nearly 325 hams earning a deck of WRTC playing cards by working at least 52 of the 54 stations (52 full competitors and two exhibition teams). More than 1800 hams became eligible for other souvenirs by logging at least 10 WRTC contacts.

Publicity chairman Rusty Epps, W6OAT, who sent out the awards, was especially pleased to see how many newer hams and noncontesters participated in WRTC. "Many hams wrote notes saying, 'This is the first time I've won anything.' They were thrilled because WRTC gave them goals that required work, but that were achievable."

Derek Wills, AA5BT, confirmed Rusty's remarks. Derek worked all 54 stations on CW from Austin, Texas, and reported, "The signals were distinctive—not overpowering signal strengths, but smooth, fast CW. The pileups were usually small, and the ops nearly always came back smoothly with the right call sign (only one of the 54 teams busted my call sign, by one dit)."

### The Day After

After the contest, competitors arriving back at the motel excitedly compared notes on their experiences until the wee hours. Dave Sumner, K1ZZ, recalled, "At 2:30 in the morning, about a third of them were still standing around the motel entrance talking."

Sunday afternoon, only 13 hours after the exhausting contest, everyone involved in WRTC-96 gathered for a pool party at the motel. Between the discussions of propagation conditions, equipment problems—and yes, scores—the talk often turned to visiting hams' plans for the remainder of their time in the United States, and promises to see each other in person again.


Sicilian Giuseppe La Parola, IT9BLB, said the WRTC week brought him "much satisfaction and many friends." His teammate, Giuseppe Giunta, IT9VDQ, noted how satisfying it was to finally meet in person "people we knew only from '5-9, thank you.'"

Jun Tanaka, JH4RHF, who came to WRTC from Japan, enjoyed the pileups that the novel 1×1 call signs produced. But mostly, he said, it was "just great to meet the people from all over the world."

Danny Eskenazi, K7SS, first proposed the idea of WRTC back in 1988, chaired that event, and then relinquished the organizational duties to others this time so that he could compete in the contest himself. Still caught up in the excitement, Danny is talking about doing it again. In fact, any group interested in hosting another WRTC can contact Danny through his *Callbook* address, or by e-mail at [k7ss@wolfenet.com](mailto:k7ss@wolfenet.com).

It will be a lot of hard work, but experience shows that those involved wouldn't have missed it for the world. Chief judge Lew Gordon, K4VX, captured the essence of WRTC-96 when he released the final scores and noted, "Everyone was a winner."

*For complete WRTC results, see the September/October 1996 issue of the National Contest Journal (page 31). If you worked at least 10 WRTC stations, you're still eligible for an award. See the details on page 71 of the July 1996 QST.*

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