

RTTY Contesting

The Art of RTTY Sprinting — Part 1

Following the March North American Sprint, a number of experienced RTTY Sprinters remarked on wide excursions from accepted operating practice by some participants — perhaps newcomers unfamiliar with the terrain. An informal way of operating has evolved among Sprint regulars, and this has become the *de facto* standard. Deviations from that accepted norm may increase confusion and detract from an otherwise enjoyable experience.

RTTY operators new to Sprints have only the rules to go by and may not be aware of these commonly accepted practices. While several excellent articles have been written over the years on Sprint tips and secrets, many newcomers may not have seen them. Let's discuss the *art* of operating the RTTY Sprint and demystify this fun event.

Sprint QSY Rule

The Sprint QSY rule is at the core of the misunderstanding between crotchety old Sprinters and innocent, energetic operators venturing into this contesting niche. This unique rule is what distinguishes the Sprint from other contests. Specific practices that come into question include the order in which the required exchange elements are transmitted, and how to acknowledge and complete the contact. But, first, let's consider different ways to satisfy the QSY rule itself.

To most readers of the Sprint rules, the QSY rule implies a specific way of operation that goes like this. K6UFO finds a clear frequency and calls CQ. NØTA, N4DW, and K5NZ create a pileup, each trying to get K6UFO's attention. K6UFO works N4DW and leaves the frequency, and N4DW then works a station that calls *him*. After working that station, N4DW leaves the frequency. The initial assumption is that the pattern of contacts during a Sprint is *always* a series of these "couplets" — you find a CQing station, work it, and then work *one* more station on that frequency before you QSY yourself. This is certainly one way to work a Sprint, and it seems the most efficient at first glance. But it is not the *only* way.

For example, the Sprint rules do not require you to stay on frequency to work a second station, as in the couplet description above. Instead, you could tune

away and find another CQing station to call. This is often done when no one calls you or answers your CQs on that frequency. This tactic is also useful for operators who are learning the Sprint and may not be ready to handle a pileup or even just one station calling them. In any case, *never* calling CQ is perfectly okay in the Sprint.

Another strategy is to *only* call CQ. In this case, it's necessary to QSY 5 kHz (or to another band) for each successive QSO. Using this strategy exclusively, you would never answer anyone else's CQ. Instead of searching for stations to call, you are searching for clear frequencies to call CQ. In one SSB Sprint, the winning station called CQ exclusively for the last 3 hours of the contest. He set his two VFOs 7 kHz apart on 40 meters, alternating CQs between the two frequencies.

Any of these operating practices or combination thereof is completely valid in a Sprint. The only constraint is that you must change frequency (or band) after a contact in which another station calls you. You must QSY at least 1 kHz before calling another station, or at least 5 kHz before calling CQ. If you move 1 kHz to work a station that called CQ, you may stay on that frequency to work one more station, or you may call CQ there until you work a second station.

Experienced Sprinters use all of these tactics, depending upon circumstances. For example, suppose a pileup descends at the completion of a contact, but the station that *could* have stayed for a second QSO on that frequency has gone elsewhere too. In the silence following the pileup, one caller may simply switch gears and call another station that was in the pileup. The station that breaks the silence and calls may remain on frequency for another contact. The other station must QSY, however, since it was the *called* station. Other variations are possible, as long as you observe the basic QSY rule.

Sprint Exchange

As in other contests, each station must include several pieces of information in a Sprint exchange, and a signal report is *not* one of them! Sending non-essential information only slows down the contest for everyone. The Sprint rules explicitly state that a valid exchange consists of, "The other station's call sign, your call sign, your serial number, your name, and your location (state, province, or country). You

may send this information in any order."

Yet, veteran Sprint operators are very precise regarding the order in which they send the exchange information. Moreover, they do it in two different ways at different times during each QSO. For example:

K6LL: NA K6LL K6LL CQ
AA3B: AA3B AA3B
K6LL: AA3B K6LL 132 DAVE AZ
AA3B: K6LL 136 BUD PA AA3B
K6LL: TU

At this point K6LL is required to QSY.

KØAD: KØAD KØAD
AA3B: KØAD AA3B 137 BUD PA
KØAD: AA3B 119 AL MN KØAD
AA3B: R

At this point AA3B is required to QSY.

KØAD: NA KØAD KØAD CQ
N6RO: N6RO N6RO

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There is a reason these stations have adopted such uniform exchanges in the Sprint, even though the rules do not require it. Notice that K6LL sent his call sign following AA3B's at the start of his exchange, while AA3B sent his call sign at the very end of his exchange. An early Sprinter recognized that, if the station leaving the frequency after a contact puts his/her call sign early in the exchange, that would alert anyone listening that the station would moving on once the QSO is completed. In other words, don't call that station!

The station in the contact that is allowed to stay on the frequency for one more QSO communicates this by putting his/her call sign at the *end* of the exchange. This latter practice works well for new stations just tuning across the end of the QSO, because they will know immediately that they may call that station as soon as they hear a "TU" or "R" from the first station in the QSO.

Radiosport competitors all benefit by working together to maximize QSO rate and to minimize errors. The result is fast, reliable communication. It is fun to operate the Amateur Radio station at peak performance. The precise order of exchange elements, depending on whether the station is leaving or staying on the frequency, has evolved into an accepted convention, as Sprinters cooperate to make contacts as efficiently as possible.

Let's look at why serial number, name, and QTH are always sent in that order. This accepted norm gives the receiving operator the advantage of knowing which

information element to expect at a given instant. This reduces chances that an exchange element will be missed, requiring a repeat. This would slow things down and disadvantage both operators.

Ending the RTTY Sprint QSO

How you handle the completion of a RTTY Sprint contact either can effect a smooth transition into the next QSO or set off a spectacle of confusion. In like fashion, how you interpret and respond to the completion of a QSO either can contribute to an effective transition or to bedlam. Remember, this is not so much about the rules as it is about conventions that have developed over the life of Sprint contesting.

First, refer to the earlier QSO sequence. Following convention, the last two transmissions in a given QSO are:

AA3B: K6LL 136 BUD PA AA3B
K6LL: TU

Bud, AA3B, has sent his exchange with his call sign at the end, signaling that he will be staying on the frequency for another contact. K6LL acknowledges completion of the QSO with "TU" and leaves the frequency.

Second, during these last two transmissions, other stations on frequency prepare to send their call signs once or twice as soon as they copy that "TU." Thus, everyone knows what to expect, what they can do, and when they can do it. Very simple and smooth, but still a practice that may be unknown to newcomers.

The final transmission in the QSO — whether "TU," "R," or "QSL" — is critical. First, it tells the station being worked that his exchange has been received and no fills or repeats are needed. Second, it is brief and to the point. Sending additional information almost always triggers confusion and disrupts an otherwise smooth transition into the next QSO. It could even cause some stations to tune away to find another contact.

Tempting as it is, do not send your call sign or the other station's call sign, as this may lead to confusion as to which station (AA3B in the example) is standing by for the follow-on QSO. Don't send "QSY." This just takes additional time and adds no useful information. As polite as it may seem to wish the other station good luck and 73, understand that good contesting etiquette calls for conveying the minimal information needed to reliably accomplish the QSO. Contesters socialize *outside* of a contest, such as regaling each other with excuses about why their scores aren't higher!

In the September/October column, we'll wrap up this topic with a discussion of Messages, SO2R, SO2V and other tips.