

New Analog Only Class in VHF Contests.

So, as you folks know, I was very vague at the Hamcation meeting about the survey and what the VHF subcommittee was working on but at the time (the plan was already in action) we had to wait for the final approval. Now the meaning of what was issued is the following published statement by the Subcommittee chairman, WOZQ.

“Per the recent ARRL Contest Bulletin a new analog only subcategory has been added to the June VHF contest for the SOHP, SOLP, SO3B and SOP categories. You still work a station only once per band regardless of mode (no change). The new category is intended to address those contest participants who wish to use only SSB/CW /FM allowing them to not have to compete with those who are also use digital modes (or perhaps only digital modes), plus it creates a category of contest stations that you can only worked by using SSB/CW/FM.”“

I understand that the FLWSS members are interested in the reasoning and I promised to explain it all at our next scheduled meeting but since it was canceled, I'll try to explain assuming I would hear questions along the way.

To start, as a review process after the survey, we analyzed the data from the three VHF contests from the past 5-6 years. We had a base line of what was going on before and after the introduction of FT-8. Using the Survey as a guideline, we looked for trends and discrepancies between the real Data and “What the People Said” in the survey. The bottom line was a gradual trend towards the operating practices we have today in the contests. The results clearly showed that 50 % of the operators had no “real” issues in operating all modes in any VHF and above contest. It also showed that a different 25% of the operators operated only digital or specifically FT-8/FT-4 and mainly on 6M. This left the remaining 25% of operators that were only interested in analog (CW/SSB and yes, FM) operation. So, the hard decision for us was how do we make everyone happy?

Digging further into the data showed that the majority of the digital only operators were in the contest to pump up their grid counts or just to enjoy the

bedlam that existed on 6M FT-8/FT-4 during the contest. Even though most submitted a log for scoring, they were not in the contest to compete, just to enjoy the increase in activity. They were also mostly new to VHF contesting and very inconsistent in their contest to contest activity.

The next important trend that was discovered was that operators that want to compete in the contest needed to spend more time in the digital world to run up a score. The old “Activity breeds Activity” scenario is now the norm forcing the majority of active contest operators into spending more time on digital if they wanted to be competitive. So—what did this do to the contest’s analog modes?

We all know what was happening. That’s why we all had complaints about where the VHF contests of the future were heading. The QSO with the analog modes were shrinking and the FT-8 modes were becoming the mainstream of operating in the contest. The result was, many are being turned off about competing in the contests. So, the major facts that we chose to make our decisions on are the following:

The majority of digital only operators do not have much concern that there is a contest in process even though most submit a score. They are in it for the “Fun of it “and because they can operate the digital modes only.

The major contest operators in competition will do whatever it takes (though reluctantly) to work any QSO they find into the log no matter what mode it may be on. They go where the action is.

The majority of analog only operators are working less and less QSO’s and are trending to be less and less involved in VHF contests. Again, activity breeds activity and they are on the trend towards extinction.

Now, not getting into the discussion of Digital vs. Analog and the merits of each other’s existence in Amateur radio, and the use /misuse of the technology is used correctly or not, the sub-committee made the following conclusions.

The majority of digital only operators were happy with the way the contest was operated. They tend to be new operators to VHF contesting but are not

consistent in their contest to contest activity. So, nothing to fix here, no rule change required. Set the date, they chose to operate or not. Their main concern in the survey was not to eliminate digital operation from the event.

The majority of the operators of the contests said that it didn't matter what mode the QSO was, they would go and get it. BUT, they did have a preference of what mode to make QSO's on during certain conditions as we have discussed repeatedly on this reflector. Many suggested the community needs education (not a bad idea) but most did not understand that large majority of digital QSO's they were chasing were new to the mix and inexperienced in VHF contesting. Still, the majority of this group preferred analog operation when the band is good and then humps out the DX when the band is not so good on the digital modes.

This leaves the analog only operators. For whatever the reasons for not operating any digital at all (and we heard many in the survey) the majority of the issues came from this group. These are the operators that needed something done or they are gone. So using "activity breeds activity" for the reasoning, the new analog only class was suggested.

Now, what do we hope this will do? We are all familiar with the "Watering Holes" on the VHF bands we use. They are there so the sparse activity has a place to go to enhance the probability of making a QSO on the VHF and higher bands. This is one of the most appealing aspects of FT-8. You know where to go and you don't even need to listen. You watch the screen and somewhere within that 3 kHz section of the band will be a QSO waiting to happen. So what happened to the analog watering holes? They are still there but now just not as active as they were 6-10 years ago. With the VHF contest rules being "All Mode" and the increased digital activity of the new comers to VHF contesting, the major activity moved to the new "Watering Hole". It is believed that by creating a competitive class of operation of analog only will reinvigorate those portions of the bands that were full of QSO's in the past while providing those that wish to "contest" in analog mode only to be competitive with only those that chose to do the same.

On paper with the data we have to support this, it says that 75% of the operators get a boost in the type of activity that they will enjoy and the other 25% are unaffected by the change. It creates a new (OLD) class of operation that certain individuals will excel in while displaying their skills. Another plus will be that the digital modes will be less congested and the analog modes will be more active. This is created by the 50% of operators that will now spend more time in the analog modes in search of the now larger population that will only be found there. It will also stimulate those new comers to VHF contesting to possibly expand their operation to include analog modes if they wish to be competitive in mixed mode VHF contests.

So, the largest populated classes of operation are the SOHP, SOLP, SO3B and SOP categories. Make the class of choice and operate as you wish and submit your logs after the contest no matter what the size of it is. Get on and have some fun in VHF! If you have any questions that I can address, I will answer to the best of my ability on the reflector. Thanks for reading and participating!

Steve, N2CEI