



HSeemstoUs

David Sumner, IUZZ-dsumner@arrl.org
ARRL Chief Executive Officer

A Fresh Approach to VHF/UHF Contests

*"If you have never entered a VHF/UHF contest—
or if it has been a while — mark June 13-14 on your calendar!"*

Here's a trivia question for you. What was the most popular ARRL-sponsored VHF contest of all time?

The answer will probably surprise you: The VHF Sweepstakes in January 1961. That's right — more than 50 years ago. There were 1561 logs submitted for that event, held in the dead of winter when band conditions were at their worst. The main ingredient of the

event's popularity was the affiliated club competition. The top five clubs fielded 463 entries — quite a testimony to their organizing ability and team spirit.

In those days, nearly all of the activity was on AM, and almost entirely on 6 and 2 meters. Most of the transmitters then in use were crystal controlled; after calling CO, an operator had to tune across a wide swath of the band, listening carefully for calls. The most popular frequencies, determined by military surplus crystals, were a roar of heterodynes. Television interference, caused mostly by front end overload of the TV receiver, was a massive problem for 6 meter operators in areas served by V channel 2.

In 1961 there were about 210,000 amateur licensees in the United States, compared to about 725,000 today — but in 2014 there were just 622 entries in the January VHF Contest. So, despite all of those obstacles, the likelihood of an amateur entering the 1961 event was more than eight times as great as in 2014.

At that time there were three VHF contests on the ARRL calendar, held in January, June, and September. Today, in addition to those three, we sponsor three more on frequencies above 30 MHz: a UHF contest (222 MHz and up) in August, a two-weekend event for 10 GHz and up in August and September, and an EME contest spread over three weekends. The June contest attracts the most participation, thanks to the probability of good sporadic-E propagation on 6 meters, and occasionally on 2, at that time of year — but activity in all of them is well below full potential.

Making a Plan

Over the years, there have been a number of efforts to encourage greater VHF/UHF/microwave activity through changes in the contest rules. Most recently, in 2014 the ARRL Programs & Services Committee (P&SC) created a small ad hoc committee to discuss various issues related to the contest program for the VHF and higher bands. The committee formulated initial recommendations and in November sought membership input. The committee's background statement for its recommendations is a good summary of the objectives of the program:

Contest participation benefits both individual amateurs and the Amateur Radio Service as a whole. Individual operators gain overall operating experience; increase their knowledge of band characteristics; test the results of changes in equipment, antennas, and locations; and have incentive to add bands and modes to their station complement, all in the context of enjoyable yet challenging activities. The Amateur Radio Service increases its pool of skilled operators and can show more intense usage of the frequencies allocated to us, some of which may be under threat from ever-expanding commercial and consumer services seeking to expand their share of spectrum. Increased activity also signals higher potential demand

for new product to manufacturers of Amateur Radio equipment.

The ARRL VHF-UHF-Microwave contest program was created to help foster the foregoing benefits and, accordingly, seeks to:

1. Increase the level and breadth of participation in ARRL VHF and up contests; and
2. Encourage the utilization of our less-used Amateur Radio bands.

With those objectives in mind, the main thrust of the ad hoc committee's initial recommendations was to eliminate rules that prevent contest participants from publicizing their availability for contacts and using various ways to find out who else is available. Comments received in response to the proposals were supportive, so in January 2015 the P&SC endorsed the ad hoc committee's recommendations and forwarded them to the full Board of Directors for consideration. The Board adopted them for implementation beginning with this year's June VHF Contest.

What's In the New Rules

The new rules permit all entrants, regardless of category, to use spotting assistance or nets including but not limited to OX alerting nets, Internet chat rooms, APRS and other packet, reverse beacon networks, and repeaters to identify stations available for contacts and to announce (self-spot) their availability for contacts. Announcements may only include call sign, location, band or frequency, mode and — if applicable — transmitting sequence and listening direction. Complete rules are at www.arrl.org/june-vhf.

No one expects these changes to return participation to 1961 levels overnight. The ad hoc committee is continuing its work, which includes evaluating the effect of new categories that were introduced in 2013 to give those who only have equipment for FM or for the three most popular VHF/UHF bands (6 meters, 2 meters, and 70 centimeters) a chance to compete on an equal basis.

In the meantime, why don't we focus on clubs, the secret to past success? A classic OST article in the October 1957 issue described a "Club Saver" construction project that put new life into an old radio club. That project involved 50 club members building club-designed transceiver kits to get them on 2 meters. Today, equipment is not the problem. There are tens of thousands of multimode transceivers that cover the three most popular bands. There are hundreds of thousands of FM rigs for at least one band, and often for two or more. The problem is motivation, and perhaps an antenna.

A good club can supply both. Motivation: "Let's get our club listed in OSTI!" Antennas: There are simple, inexpensive designs for small VHF and UHF Yagis that can be built in an evening as a group project.

Why not give it a try?

David Sumner, K1ZZ