Tips for Net Control

By Madeline Lombaerde

These are things I have done and learned while operating as Net Control at various events and found them to be quite helpful. Hope you do, too!

1. On a blank 8.5"x11" sheet of paper, make a list of all the posts that have to be covered. Typically, the post name becomes the tactical call sign. On this sheet, right the first name and call sign of each person assigned to a particular post. Make this the working base for assignments. As people are rotated, cross off those no longer at a post and write in the person currently assigned to it.
2. Get or make a copy of the sign-in sheet showing the list of amateur radio operators who are working at the event, available for assignments.
3. Find out if someone has been promised a particular post; assign those people first. Next, find out who has a preference as to where they are assigned. Ask for physical limitations (back problems, limited walking capability). Assign posts accordingly. Find out who has to leave early and the time they have to go.
4. Remind everyone that they are not to leave their post without first informing Net Control. This is especially imperative for the critical posts. If they have to take a break, they should first call Net Control and state the expected length of time they need to be away from the post. For any break longer than 5 minutes (except for shadows), a new person should be assigned to take over the post. For shadows, a new person must be assigned even for a 5 minute break. (In just a minute a shadow can get separated from the person being shadowed and communication to that event person is lost.)
5. Have everyone do a radio check with Net Control BEFORE leaving the Net Control area. Make sure they have PL set properly and can easily switch to the secondary frequency if necessary. Make sure each person knows their tactical call sign.
6. Everyone should report to Net Control when they reach their post ("on station"). Net Control should request a radio signal report from each station to determine the lowest power setting that Net Control can use and still be heard at every post.
7. Net Control needs to make an "all stations" announcement on the main frequency used for the event requesting that all stations stand-by until the end of the event (give an approximate time). This should be done when the Net is started and every hour or so until the end at which time the frequency should be released for normal use.
8. Once all posts have reported in, it's a good idea to do a roll call every hour or so. If a post doesn't answer, try it two more times then move on. After roll call try the post again. If still no response, send someone to find the person at the post and have them check that they aren't off frequency and that the battery isn't dead. (In the past, hams have commented, "I was wondering why it was so quiet on the Net … I didn't hear anything for a long time and didn't realize it was a problem with my radio.)

9. It is extremely important that Net Control follow up on all requests for information. Net Control will not have all the answers, but should be able to get them, particularly from the Comm Boss. Post-it notes are a good way to note down traffic that requires a reply. As the replies are given, the Post-it can be tossed or filed away as desired. Sometimes a formal log sheet is requested or required. The benefit to the log sheet is that it provides an orderly historical record of what's happened in the event so far. Whatever method you use, note the time the information was requested and the time the reply was given.
10. When rotating people as Net Control, be sure to let the next person know what's happening, and what replies are pending. It's important to have them use the Post rotation sheet so when you return or another person takes over, the post assignments are clearly indicated.
11. Every post must be able to hear and contact Net Control. However, individual posts may not be able to hear one another. It's helpful for Net Control to repeat traffic that all posts should know about. For instance, Nancy's Shadow reports that Nancy is looking for Dan. Net Control can say something like "I copy that Nancy is looking for Dan; all posts should report Dan's location to Net Control."
12. Let posts go directly to each other whenever possible. Relay only if one post can't hear the other.   When a post needs to "go direct", they should contact Net Control requesting to go direct to the other post. "Go direct" is all that Net Control has to say. When the traffic is complete, the requesting station should contact Net Control to hand back the frequency. If this isn't done, Net Control should ask the initiating post if they are finished with their direct traffic.
13. Long messages (item lists, long transmissions between posts) should be put off to the secondary frequency so the primary frequency isn't tied up.
14. Allow some "drop" time so priority traffic can break in if necessary. If an exchange goes on for more than 30 seconds, take a breath between transmissions "just in case". Also, if Net Control needs a moment to think about something, don't keep the PTT button pushed. Do your thinking off the air.
15. It's okay to ask a station to "stand by" while you finish with some other communications or finish handling some situation at the Net Control station. Just make sure you're not putting off priority or emergency traffic.
16. Be sure to have a map of the entire event with key locations clearly marked. A lot of traffic comes in asking where such-and-such is.
17. Always be sure you can easily contact the Comm Boss. If the Comm Boss has to leave the event temporarily, have a radio frequency or cell phone available to contact him even when off site. Make sure the Comm Boss monitors the radio or has the cell phone turned on.
18. The FCC requires that hams give their call signs every 10 minutes and when a contact is finished. Since Net Control is transmitting frequently, be sure to give your call sign every 10 minutes. ("This is KD6JTU, Net Control for the Half Moon Bay Dream Machines event"). Shadow hams or those at a post may want to end every completed communication with Net Control using something like "This is Nancy's Shadow, WB6WGM" because they really don't know if they'll be transmitting again within 10 minutes.