

RADIO RACERS

Ham stars in Seattle for world competition

by Kit Boss
Times staff reporter



Speed. Stamina. Strategy. These qualities have turned Paolo Cortese into an all-star-caliber competitor in his sport and a household name among his global peers.

A humongous antenna didn't hurt, either.

Cortese, a jovial, bearded man built like a haystack, passes snapshots of his antenna like some men proffer baby photos. They picture a 140-foot-tall construction crane plunked in a dairy pasture near his Northern Italian home. Atop the crane stands an even higher web of spars and wires that would not look out of place on a NATO radar base.

"There is a saying," Cortese says in his Milanese-accented English. "If you had a high wind and your antenna didn't fall down, it wasn't high enough."

Cortese is one of about 50 amateur radio devotees — hams, for short — gathered in Seattle for today's World Radiosport Team Championships, sponsored under the good will exchange program of the 1990 Goodwill Games.

The event pits international two-member teams, mouths to mics and fingers to morse-code keys, in a nonstop, 10-hour marathon to contact the most hams around the world.

It may be the most unusual competition of the Games. It also seems one of the most fitting.

"From South Africa or Russia or anywhere, there's no borders," says Tine Brajnik, a five-time Yugoslavian amateur radio champion competing in Seattle for his country's radiosport team.

"Nobody is under any pressure — politically, religiously — when sitting behind the radio. There's always a friend on the other side."

Brajnik and his fellow competitors trekked to Seattle from 15 countries, including Japan, Canada, the U.S. and Soviet Union, Spain,



Benjamin Benschneider / Seattle Times
Paolo Cortese of Italy, right, talks ham radios with Ville Hillesmaa of Finland. Both are in Seattle for the World Radiosport Team Championships, a ham-radio competition.

Finland and Bulgaria. Some were handpicked by their nations' amateur radio governing bodies. Others earned the honor through national competitions.

Most arrived in Seattle earlier this week to tweak equipment and socialize.

"This is a reunion. A worldwide reunion," says Danny Eskenazi, chairman of the competition, sitting outside his West Seattle home with its towering antenna and its breathtaking view of Puget Sound. It is Wednesday evening and his back yard is filled with old friends, many of whom have never before met face-to-face.

Beside him sits Vladimir "Willy" Umanets, a wiry member of the Soviet team, wearing sandals, sweatpants and a black tank top

decorated with the silver letters KGB.

The two men first spoke on the radio 17 years ago. The shirt is a slight gag intended for Eskenazi, who has often joked that Umanets belongs to the Soviet secret police.

Their colleagues set down plates of cold cuts and long-neck bottles of beer to shake hands. They introduce each other by first name and call sign, a short series of letters and numbers like a license plate that ham operators use to identify themselves on the air.

Cortese, who owns a toy shop, wears a mesh baseball cap emblazoned with his call

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sign, I2UIY.

Across the yard, Jacky Calvo, a member of the French team and editor of the French language Megahertz Magazine, recounts his trip earlier this year to Bouvet, a desolate island near the South Pole.

He visited on what hams call a DX-Pedition. The goal: visit remote sites that have no amateur radio operators and set up shop. During 17 days, Calvo and 4 other operators made 50,000 contacts. Hams around the world view these DX-Pedition contacts like philatelists view a rare stamp.

These high-powered hams are a thin slice from the hock of the world's radio hobbyists, a group that the International Radio Union pegs at about 4 million strong.

From 2 p.m. until midnight today, friendship should yield to fierce competition. One participant compared radiosporting contests to a marathon Nintendo game played mostly with the ears, not the eyes.

A ham radio beams out waves much shorter than those you pick

up on a stereo receiver, but longer than the type used in TV broadcasts. Unlike the waves carrying rock 'n' roll or "Jeopardy," these ham signals can bounce off an electrified layer of the atmosphere and land thousands of miles away.

Sunspots, thunderstorms, time of day, geography — all can stretch or squeeze the range of a ham signal.

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The best ham contestants have been known to make 300 contacts in a single hour. Sometimes they spin the dials that control a set's frequency or an antenna's direction and troll for other signals. Other times they park on a clear frequency and wait, like anglers on a pier.

They watch computer screens to monitor sunspot activity. They eye clocks and calculate where the

sun is rising or setting — generally the best times for signals to reach remote locales.

It is not a sport recognized by the Olympics or ESPN, though the Soviet Union bestows on radio-sport masters the same honors given champion weightlifters or gymnasts. With enough passion to pierce the thickest static, hams argue that their sport deserves equal standing with a game like chess, while admitting it offers even fewer enticements for spectators.

This contest is unique, though. And its organizers hope that may help bring more attention to radio-sporting.

For the first time, an international constellation of ham stars is competing on even footing. Operating radio stations in the Seattle area, factors such as power, antenna height and geography have been equalized.

"Now should come out the operating skill," says Cortese.

The winners will receive medals, a certificate, a commemorative jacket.

"To a nonham I guess it's a boring kind of thing," says Will Roberts, a North Carolinian member of the U.S. team. "It probably doesn't make sense."

It makes perfect sense.