Running a Net

The Norfolk ARC Monday night net is an informal net run by volunteers, but even so, some Net Protocols should be observed, not on a completely formal basis, but just with some basic discipline and tops and tails formal procedures.

   Each net you run is an opportunity to sharpen your on-the-air skills. In listening to our weekly 2 metre net, I have noticed some areas that often leave room for improvement. Please think about your own techniques and ask yourself whether any of these might apply to you. Running the net on the GB3NB repeater is an ideal opportunity to exhibit good operating skills and show NARC in a good light. Running a net on a simplex channel is the same although formality is not so important. The GOM net in the mornings is an example of this. We don't have a formal procedure at all; it's merely a chat net, using quick sound bites, in fact not really a "net" as such.

Some basics for the Net Control Station (NCS)

1) **Long pauses are not good.** They waste time and leave everyone wondering what's going on . . . Should I call again? Shall I add my call to the last one? Did Net Control have a radio failure? Just listen carefully, write down what you hear and respond promptly. Remember, you're not just logging someone else's transmissions, you are supposed to be controlling the frequency. Long delays also make the whole net run too long. Get on with it! If you can't read call signs accurately when you hear them, ask for repeats. At a suitable pause, run the list of calls you have and ask if there are any other check-ins? If they don't hear their call in the list they will respond.

2) **Avoid non-specific acknowledgements.** Each time you come back to someone, everyone listening should have no doubt as to which station you were addressing. Saying OK, I have you" is useless; you have who? If two stations called and you couldn't hear one of them, they both think they're checked in. Say, "G9zzz, I have you". If you missed part of a call sign, ask for the missing part. "M6X-something-Z, what's the middle letter?" or "XYZ, your prefix please?" And when you need the suffix, don't ask for the prefix. Be sure you know the difference and ask for the right one or just a plain repeat of the call if you were not certain of any of it.

3) **Phonetics are for stations calling in for the first time.** If you hear Mike Six X-ray Yankee Zulu, you can acknowledge M6XYZ. Same on check-out;

everyone is in the log by then, so phonetics are superfluous then. The only time Net Control needs to use phonetics is to clarify a call sign ("Was that Delta Papa Bravo or Delta Bravo Bravo?") or when two call signs sound so similar that you need to distinguish the one you're calling from the one you're not calling.

4) **Don't think out loud with the push-to-talk engaged.** If you're on the air saying "Let's see, where I did I put that pencil?" you will sound disorganised and won't be projecting the confidence and authority that Net Control should display. If you need a few seconds, say "All stations please stand by" and let go of the mic button.

5) **Be sure you have a loud, clear signal on the net frequency. (** This is for simplex only.) Ask for an accurate signal report ahead of net time. If you're noisy or have low audio, ask someone to take over while you figure out what the problem is. You can't control the frequency if you're hard to hear.

By consciously avoiding the problems described above, you will be practising doing it right rather than reinforcing bad habits. That will make it easier to keep doing it right in the future.

Typical Scenario

Activating the Net

The NCS accesses the repeater at the correct time and tops the net with:

"Good evening and welcome to this week's Norfolk Amateur Radio Club Monday Night Net. This is _____(callsign), acting net control for this evening's net. This is an "Informal" net set up by the Norfolk Amateur Radio Club for the purpose of sharing amateur radio related information about events in the club, and discussion of the relevant subject for the week. This net is open to all amateurs licensed to operate on the 2-meter band. This is a directed net. All traffic must be routed through this net control station. When checking in, please provide your call sign and your name.
  Anyone wishing to check in to the Norfolk Amateur Radio Club Monday Night Net, please call _____(callsign) at this time…"

Users check in WITH NO GAPS. The NCS makes a list of those he copies and at a pause in check-ins says:

"I have G3xxx, 2E0xxx, G4xxx and M6xxx. Any more?"

Users not mentioned will then check in again. This goes on until the NCS has all stations that wish to check in. There should be NO PAUSES OR GAPS. It's a total waste of time. This is probably the most difficult part of running a net. You will have stations wishing to check in that have poor signal quality, making it difficult to copy their check-in. You will have stations "double" with other stations, making them difficult to sort out. If you can't copy a call sign, just record the portion of it that you heard and go on. DON'T be afraid to ask for the call sign again. With practice, this becomes easier and easier. Ask check-ins to keep their overs short and to direct any traffic or requests to other participants in the Net THROUGH the NCS. If you think you are likely to be called away, appoint another station as a deputy NCS in your absence.

About every 10 minutes (or less if you need to) take a standby for more stations wishing to check in. Some stations will not be available at the first check-in. Also, ask if any mobiles would like to use the repeater. This is the polite thing to do considering the Net is tying up the repeater for an hour or so.

Closing the Net

After all discussions and announcements are completed, it's time to close the net. Before closing, take one more standby for last minute check-ins. Acknowledge these new stations, let them give their input, if any, then close the net. A sample closing tails statement might be:

"...That concludes this week's Norfolk Amateur Radio Club Monday Night Net. Thanks to everyone who checked in this evening, and we hope you will join us again next Monday at 7.30 PM on this frequency. On behalf of the Norfolk Amateur Radio Club, I'd like to say thanks for the use of GB3NB for this Net. This net is now secure, and the repeater is returned to normal operation. This is _____(callsign) Good Evening to all those taking part and the listeners. 73 and see you next week"

"DO"s and "DON'T"s

Things to do…
- Start the net on time.
- Have a good signal into the repeater.
- Accept and acknowledge all stations checking in. Provide plenty of opportunity for check-ins.
- Be courteous to participants.
- Speak clearly and be concise.
- Let the repeater drop for possible mobiles every ten minutes or so.
- ID your station and the Net every ten minutes.

Things NOT to do…
- Don't tie up the repeater for an extended period of time with no pauses.
- Don't be afraid to ask again for information you didn't copy.
- Don't lose control of the net. Keep it focused. There is only ONE NCS.
- Don't give out phone numbers or email addresses without prior consent.

Don't take all this too seriously. This is a fun activity, but we should try to achieve an efficient way of operating and be proud of what we do.