

Thoughts about Fiddle Contests, by Ed Carnes

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(also found at <https://www.carnesgroup.com/normalized-scoring-system/thoughts/>)

This is something I wrote about competing in fiddle contests and I update from time to time. I have played in fiddle contests for over 48 years all over the US and Canada. I have won some, lost some, had tons of fun, and had a few not so fun times. Here are a few things I learned.

1. **No one wins every time.** No matter Who you are!
2. **Different geographic areas like different fiddling styles.** You can be considered the best in one area and the worst in another area, so your contest results can greatly depend on where you are.
3. **No one fiddle style is really better than another, and “good fiddling” depends on your perspective.** Respect the area where you are competing. You might have to adjust your normal playing style a little bit if you want to win!
4. **You cannot make a living playing fiddle contests.** They should not be used as your income supplement in order to make a living. If you break even or have a great time that should be enough. “Semi-Pro” players sometime discourage others from entering and it is disheartening to not have a chance against them.
5. **Be happy when you win, gracious when you lose, or at least smile and not be negative.** People (including young players) are watching you. Set a good example.
6. **When watching other contestants or musicians at a contest, be careful what you say.** Remember these words: “*You Never Know Who’s Standing Behind You*” (the “Seven Word Rule”). When someone is jamming or on stage and you perhaps make criticizing or negative comments about their playing, clothing or whatever – you can bet they have a friend or family member in ear shot. I know a parent that once made a remark to a fiddler about their playing out of tune in a contest, and that fiddler would not speak to their child for some time and actively judged them down. Don’t say negative things about people or criticize them at the contest. If you feel you have to comment – **don’t**.
7. **If you do not like your results, do your griping in the car on the way home - NOT at the contest.** Complaining to anyone who will listen at the contest makes you look like a sore loser - even if you should have won. **This is one of the most important lessons to follow.**
8. **If you did not place as you think you should have, please DON’T blame the coordinators.** They work to put on the best event they can. Your placement comes from the Judges and THEIR scores. Do not give the coordinators a hard time and hold grudges. After all, they didn’t judge you.
9. **Do not bad mouth a contest - just do not go to it the next time if you do not like it.** A bad attitude and negativity at the contest do no one any good.
10. **If you think you can do better than a contest you attended, put on a contest Yourself – it is a TON of Work and is Very Underappreciated.** It will open your eyes – and you will have a greater idea of what all is needed to hold a contest; and you will not look at contests the same way again.
11. **Paying only a few exceptionally large prizes is not the best way to support a contest.** Paying a just a few places with high prizes sounds like it would encourage a big turnout for Major players to come and compete - **it usually does the opposite.** Pay a lot of places, have a lot of age categories, and spread the

money out. Paying a few big prizes tends to make most people feel they will not have a chance and so they don't attend. If contestants know they might at least get some expense money they are more likely to attend. A contest needs players of all ages and levels to be successful.

12. Every time you get on the stage you give a set of humans the right to judge you. They can judge you and place you in the contest as THEY see fit – not as YOU see fit, or as YOU are used to placing. **KEEP THAT IN MIND.**

13. Soliciting advice from judges or coordinators can be both good and bad. After a contest if you (or a family member) approach the coordinator or judges(s) and asks: "I didn't place like I think I should, what did I do wrong?" be ready because that's a tough question. Sometimes it's the way you played, sometimes it's the style, or any number of other reasons. But the one answer I find - the most common - is the one that few want to accept: "*You played great, but some others just played better.*" If you are not prepared to hear this, then don't ask the question.

14. Asking for judges to make comments on contestant score sheets requires an open mind. Feedback is not always accepted if it's not positive, and it can cause hard feelings. Judges know this and know it could subject them to upset contestants or parents. They will just say something positive for everyone, which is not really feedback at all. The best feedback is when it is giving anonymously - it is more likely to be accurate.

15. Your winning abilities will vary over the years. Keep going and support the music even if you cannot win like you once did. It can take letting go of a little ego; or maybe push you to get back to practicing!

16. If you attend a contest and want to comment on the placement or results, then you need to watch every player in the entire category of competition. Base your opinion only on the playing of that competition at that time - not on the "usual" results or the reputation of the players. If you didn't attend but were able to see a high-quality video/audio, then the same applies. However, if you did not attend, or didn't see every player in the category or competition, then your opinion is likely not an informed one and people might not appreciate it - keep this in mind. Re-read #8 and #10.

17. Freely share your knowledge with younger folks and beginners at the contest. This is especially if you are an established player. Remember how it felt when you were starting out. Set an example.

18. If you are a Parent of a young contestant, please provide positive support for your child no matter how they did or did not place. Encourage them, despite how you might have felt things went. Anything negative you might say about how your child is placed, about the judging, about the contest, or about anything else can cause a harmful perception of your child. They are the contestant - not you - and an over-bearing parent can really cause friction. Set a good sportsmanship example for your child. If you (as the parent) are upset, see #7, #9, and #10.

19. Act appropriately and respectfully at a contest. A lot of eyes are watching, everyone from small children and parents to the people who fund the contest. Unacceptable behavior can spoil things for others, can get the coordinators in trouble, or jeopardize their reputation, and even get the contest canceled for the future. It has happened too many times.

And finally:

My fiddle hero Benny Thomason was one of the humblest people I ever met. I never heard him say a bad thing about anyone, he never claimed he played better than anyone else, and he never said that his style was better than anyone else. Emulate Benny. Play because you love to play and compete because you like to compete and support the music.