$8.00

The Missouri State
Old Time Fiddlers Association

Guide to Judging a Fiddle Contest

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Introduction

Judging a fiddle contest seems at first glance to be an easy job. You sit down in a shady place with some of your buddies, listen to some fiddling, and then just do what you do at home: namely, decide what sounds good to you and what doesn't. Until you actually judge a few contests, see some really bad results, second-guess yourself, have a few fiddlers yell at you, and go through some late-night discussions with more experienced judges, you don't really gain an appreciation for what it is you are supposed to be doing.

There is no hard and fast set of rules for judging fiddle contests. To be a good judge, you have to come slowly to your own perspectives, hone your judgment through a great deal of informed listening, and then rely on your experience. However, there are some general concepts and guidelines that may be helpful to start you on your way, and I have tried to set these down in this booklet.

Not all of the procedures and ideas set out are equally applicable to all contests. The regimens required for a five-division contest with over a hundred entries are very different from those needed at a small-town picnic contest with eight contestants. I have tried here to give general formulas to make the judging work smoothly and correctly in most contexts.

What You Can Expect from the Contest Administrator

Supplies

Judges may generally look to the contest administrator (CA) to provide scoresheets, clipboards, several pencils with erasers, and scratch paper. The administrator should also furnish calculator(s) (preferably with a paper tape) where the judges are expected to do the final tabulation of scores. Where a CA wants to set a maximum time for performance (e.g., six minutes for all three tunes), the contest should furnish a stopwatch that is easily reset. Nonetheless, many experienced judges carry all of this (except for scoresheets, and even those sometimes) along with them, just in case.

Note that the CA should provide a copy of the scoresheet to the judges in their advance packet of materials (along with a map to the contest site, times, parking passes, meal tickets, as appropriate), so the judge can have an opportunity to review it well before the contest.

Support Staff

Other than in the smallest contests, the CA should have someone available to collect the scoresheets, do all the tabulation, and prepare a list of the winners. It is unnecessary and burdensome for the judges to have to deal with arithmetic when they should be concentrating on their primary task of assigning scores.

Amenities

The CA should provide the judges with a comfortable spot for judging (out of the sun, or rain, etc.). The seating should be also be comfortable (un-padded folding chairs won't do for more than an hour or so) and the judge's table should be set off by at least a few feet from the surrounding audience to avoid crowding and distraction. The CA should also supply occasional refreshments and allow for bathroom breaks. If no food is available at the contest site, provisions should be made for the judges to eat.

Determining Contest Structure

The number of rounds, the number of call-backs for each round, and whether scores are cumulated between rounds or not is up to the CA. What to do with ties in scoring is generally up to the CA, but the judges should have a limited right to request a play-off if they feel that is the proper method to determine the winner.

Setting the Contest Rules

The CA has the right and the obligation to establish (before the contest begins) the rules to be applied in scoring the contestants' performances. Such rules typically cover:

1. stage conduct (no "clowning", joke-telling, etc.);
2. number and type of tunes required, and order of performance ("waltz, hoedown, tune of choice", etc.);
3. tune choice ("outlawed tunes", discorded fiddles, playing same tunes on callback);
4. acceptable accompaniment (which and how many instruments, acoustic vs. electric, changing accompaniment between rounds, etc.);
5. maximum time for performance of each tune or all the tunes;
6. result of failure to appear at time one's name or number is called (disqualification, go to end of division, etc.);
7. scoring of broken performances (hesitation in performance, restarting a tune, instrument failures [broken string, popped tail-gut, slipped peg, etc.] etc.)
8. contestants' access to the scores or scoresheets (see discussion below).

These rules should be provided on a written rule sheet and made available to the contestants before the contest starts. The judges should keep copies on the judging table for reference during the scoring.

Correcting Scoring

The CA is responsible for and can properly correct numerical (tabulation) errors in the scoresheets. It is also appropriate for him to point out obvious misinterpretations of the scoresheet. For example, if a judge gives a fiddler 0 out of 25 points in the "pitch" category (and it's clear the fiddler played well in tune, but didn't play to the judge's liking) it would be proper for the CA to suggest that points be deducted in the "Old-Time Fiddling Ability" or "Good Overall" categories instead of the "pitch" category. However, this should be the limit of the CA's prerogative to affect the scoring. If the CA is actually dictating results, or changing the judges' scores, the judges are entitled to protest or even walk out of the contest.

Pre-Contest Conference

It's advisable for the judges to get together before the contest to discuss what they're going to do. They can agree on when to take breaks, the "range" for scoring, what the scoresheet requires, etc. They can put questions to the CA before the contest starts. This is also a good time for the judging panel to decide on a "Senior" judge. Having a chief among the Indians makes it easier to resolve scoring and other questions quickly and efficiently.

Personal Conduct

Most of what comprises proper conduct for a fiddle judge is simply good manners. But in case you need a reminder ...

Promptness

There are several reasons for arriving at the contest site an hour or so before the contest starts. First, contest administrators have heart palpitations when judges are late. Second, you can profitably use the time to familiarize yourself with the scoresheet, discuss scoring protocols with the other judges, etc. Third, punctuality is a demonstration of your general reliability and trustworthiness - allow the CA to feel confident about his choice of judges.

Familiarity with the Contestants

You drive to the contest with "Bob", eat lunch and dinner with him, back him up at the dance on Friday night and afterwards the two of you knock down a few brews. You are judging the contest, and Bob competes and happens to win. So what? Bob was the best fiddler, hands down, and you were only one of three judges! The problem comes in trying to convince the other contestants, the CA, and the crowd of your impartiality. And what if Bob doesn't get in the prize money at all?; just consider what the drive back home is going to be like!

Judging shouldn't prevent you from having a good time at contests, including fraternizing with the contestants. Just realize ahead of time that this situation can result in criticism and other problems.

Diligence/Attentiveness

If you gab and joke, stare off into space, or get up and move around during the contest it does three things: it takes your attention away from judging, it diverts the attention of the other judges, and, for those who observe it, it creates the appearance that you're not taking your job seriously. Let me give an extreme example. At one contest, a judge got up to use the bathroom before the current fiddler had played his third tune. When one of the other judges reminded him that the current contestant hadn't played his waltz yet, the first judge remarked "That's OK, I've got all his albums!" The point is that if a judge gives his complete attention to each tune, for each fiddler, he can be confident in his appraisals and scoring of the music. Which leads to the next topic.

Confrontation with Contestants

Inevitably, somebody (usually a contestant, his wife, or his mother) will disagree with the joint opinion of the judges regarding the scoring. This disagreement typically results in a request to examine the scoresheets.

The right of a contestant to examine the scoresheets is a matter for agreement between the CA and the judges. Some judges may have strong feelings about exposing their scoring to the contestants, and the CA should take this into account in setting this policy. Also, whatever rule is decided on should be a part of the rule sheet, or at least announced to the contestants before the contest begins. Note that a compromise is to allow the fiddlers to see their composite score (adding together the scoring from each of the judges).

Of course, there are legitimate reasons for fiddlers to look at their scoresheets. Presuming that the judging has been of a high standard, a fiddler can gain objective insights into the flaws in his

fiddling that are hard to get elsewhere. But some small-spirited fiddlers pore over the scoresheets with the sole end of uncovering the "prejudice" that led to their defeat in the contest. Every judge should be prepared to answer appropriately posed questions regarding the scoring. Don't hesitate to be pleasant but frank with the fiddler about the reasons for your judgment on his fiddling ability. Neither should you hesitate, however, to carry a tire tool to end controversies that extend beyond musical analysis and get into personalities.

Conferring with the other judges

Pre-contest discussions with the other judges are to be encouraged (see notes above). However, once the contest begins, each judge is on his own. It doesn't matter if your fellow judges are grey-bearded connoisseurs of fiddling with many years more experience than you; the CA hired **you** for the particular judging spot, and you need to apply your own judgment. Nothing discourages contestants more than to observe or learn that one judge copied another's scores. Your fellow judges may also take great offense at this practice.

Know fiddling, follow the scoresheet, be honest, and have confidence in your judgment.

Handling the Scoresheet

Dealing properly with the scoresheet is at the heart of good judging. The judge's task is to follow the dictates of the scoresheet whatever they are. If you disagree philosophically, aesthetically, or otherwise with the scoresheet and are unwilling to follow it, tell the CA ahead of time. Some of the discussion which follows is not directly related to judging, but every judge should understand the concepts expressed here.

Purpose of the Scoresheet

The first purpose of a scoresheet is to give the judges a common framework for analysis of the fiddling. This keeps the judging on an even keel and ensures that the same standards are applied to each fiddler. A second reason for the scoresheet is to advise the fiddlers in advance of the standards which will be followed in judging their fiddling. A detailed scoresheet can settle a lot of arguments ahead of time. Note that having the other "rules" of the contest ("outlawed" tunes, etc.) on a printed supplement (or even on the scoresheet itself), helps in this regard. A third reason is to provide a tangible record of the scoring in the contest. As discussed above, it should be agreed between the judges and the CA before the contest starts whether the contestants can see their own scoresheets. Note that it is never permissible for contestants to see the scoresheets for other fiddlers.

Elements of a good scoresheet

The scoresheet must require some **analysis** from the judges. By breaking down the final appraisal into categories, the scoresheet forces the judges to be clear, analytical, and discriminating in their judgment. Nonetheless, a scoresheet must be relatively simple. One scoresheet widely circulated in Missouri in the 1980's was well thought-out, detailed, and "correct" in its finely-organized categories. The problem was that, given the short time each contest tune is played, it was nearly impossible for a judge to sort out all the point ranges in all the categories correctly. As a rule of thumb, no more than three or four categories should be established for each tune (see the commentary below). Contest tunes are typically completed in less than one minute, and a judge cannot reasonably be expected to deal with more categories than this. A copy of the Missouri State Old Time Fiddlers Association scoresheet is provided at the end of this document.

Frequently scoresheets explicitly or implicitly enforce a "musical agenda." They are designed to "keep the contest old-time," etc. This sort of government of styles is within the prerogatives of the CA, and a judge should be able to follow such dictates, like it or no. If you have a real difference with that type of control over music, you should tell the CA in advance that you can't judge using that scoresheet. This format is fair, especially where the contestants have been advised in advance of the restrictions on style; and a judge must have the ability to judge under varying standards. Many people can cock their ears, listen, and say whether or not **they** like the music. An experienced fiddle judge is able to divorce himself somewhat from his own musical likes and dislikes, and follow a reasonable scoresheet.

If you really have some problems with the scoresheet, talk to the CA afterwards. It may be that he inherited the scoresheet from somebody else, has no particular goals to meet, and would be willing to change.

The Science of Judging

What NOT to Judge On:

Appearance and demeanor

The fiddler's appearance on the stage is not a valid criterion for judging the fiddling up **or** down. Where the scoresheet requires it, showmanship, clowning, jig-dancing, telling jokes to the audience, and such may result in negative scoring. However, unless the scoresheet demands it, the fiddler's looks and demeanor shouldn't effect the scoring at all.

Sentimental appeal

Sooner or later you will judge a contestant who is dying (or so old he should be dying); or he's played in the contest for twenty-four consecutive years (and never won) and now he's leaving the state for good. Or how about the eight-year old girl with dimples like the Royal Gorge, whose mom and dad accompany her on-stage and grin like possums during every tune? The crowd goes wild for this brand of contestant. How can you, a simple mortal, lay a negative judgment on contestants like these? It's elementary! You were hired to judge fairly, not sympathetically. Take consolation in the fact that every contestant should gain a proper reward from the competition itself, not just from winning.

Quality of the backup

Discriminating between the quality of the fiddle and the quality of the accompaniment can be difficult. Occasionally the backup is so poor that the entire performance is degraded. On the other hand, sometimes a guitar and bass can make a hum-drum fiddler sound like much more than he really is; this problem is particularly acute when the accompaniment tends to carry the melody. A good judge is able to listen carefully to the performance as a whole and tell the difference. Note that in some contests where the judges are secluded, the sound system pipes in only the sound of the fiddle, and not the sound of the backup artists, allowing the judges to focus on the fiddle alone.

Quality and effects of the sound system

Sometimes the sound system can alter the sound of the fiddle so drastically that accurate perception of tone and pitch becomes impossible. In one Missouri contest, the CA neglected to

provide any sound system at all. When apprised of this omission, she scavenged a battery-powered bull-horn, and held this splendid piece of acoustic technology in front of the fiddle for the first three contestants. Then her arm got tired, and she propped the bull-horn up on the scorer's table; the rest of the fiddlers had to play sitting down at the table.

In such situations, where all of the contestants are similarly effected by the sound system, judging is unpleasant but straightforward; the judges should try to listen only for the fiddling, and judge it as best they can. However, the sound system can sometimes affect the performance only of particular fiddlers. This can occur either when the amplification electronics react badly to a particular fiddle ("horn sound", bass sound over-emphasized, overtone problems, etc.), or when the fiddler does a poor job of managing the microphone (playing too close, too far away, or weaving in and out). In the former case, the judge should attempt to sort out the fiddling from the amplification and score accordingly. Where the fiddler's lack of prowess at the mike is the source of the problem, a more difficult problem is posed. The best policy is still to try to listen to the pure fiddling and ignore the effects of the sound system.

What You SHOULD Judge On:

All scoresheets have an implicit or explicit division of (more or less) objective and subjective elements of scoring.

The objective categories

"Execution"

Execution usually refers to some aspect of technical mastery of the instrument. Many scoresheets include it (or one of its components) as a category.

Pitch

Pitch is, generally, an objective category. If you have a fairly good ear (and you shouldn't be pretending to judge without one) you can tell whether the performance is on or off pitch (bad backup, discussed above, can hinder this judgment). All this said, pitch can still be a style-sensitive attribute of fiddling. Western music is organized on the diatonic scale, which prescribes a strict tonal set based on whole and half tones. However, many traditions within Western music recognize "neutral tones" or "microtonal shading." Thus, for example, a C# may tend, most appropriately, toward a C natural in some tunes. A judge should be prepared to accept and understand some variation from standard pitch, especially where it is consistent and integrated within the tune.

Nonetheless, where pitch is off, the judge should deduct appropriately. Seniors and Juniors in particular tend to foul up pitch, and many times the music is still enjoyable. But the judge's affinities for the fiddling should be compensated for in a "subjective" category. Similarly, even if you are offended by the fiddler's style, you should still score objectively in the pitch category, giving credit where it is due.

Tone

Tone deals primarily with the interaction between the bow and the string — is it "scratchy," "sweet," "sonorous," "squeaky?" A fiddler's tone doesn't need to be "violinistic" to get high marks, but it should meet some objective standard. Extreme scratchiness, squeaking, and so on should warrant point deductions. Fiddlers who play "into the string" and get a deep, resonant, and clear tone should be scored up.

Vibrato is a controversial subject in fiddling. It is so clearly a part of the violinist's technique that some fiddlers believe it is inappropriate for fiddle tunes. However, a moderate and tasteful use of vibrato, especially in waltzes and occasionally even in breakdowns, can greatly enhance tone. It is also appropriate to consider the use of vibrato under the category of "expression" (see below).

Other technical skills

"General command of the instrument" is a very loosely defined category. A judge can score it best by trying to get a sense whether the fiddler is battling and struggling with the fiddle, or whether there is naturalness and fluidity in his playing. "Ornamentation" covers glissando (slides), grace notes, triplets, turns, and so on. The ease, yet crispness, with which the fiddler executes ornaments is the polestar for judging this criterion.

"Rhythm"

In its simplest sense, rhythm refers to the organization across time of pulses (beats) into groups of two or three. These groups are in turn organized into recurring passages (measures). As it is usually applied to fiddling, however, the idea of "rhythm" becomes more complex, taking on various additional meanings.

Extra beats, part length, and "danceability"

Nothing dictates that every measure of a musical performance must be the same length. One piece of "art" music I know contains a sequence of a 3/4 measure, a 3/8 measure, and a 5/8 measure. Similarly, nowhere is it written in stone that each part must be a particular number of measures in length. Nonetheless, consistency in time and part length are a fundamental part of the dance tradition out of which fiddling has grown, and fiddle tunes are justly subject to limitations in this regard. Where deviations (dropping or adding beats) from the standard occur as a simple mistake, it should result in a deduction of points. However, where an extra beat or an extra measure are a part of a traditional version of a tune, the matter is not so simple to resolve.

Fiddle tunes in duple meter (reels, hornpipes, hoedowns etc.) are typically organized into two (or more), repeating, eight measure parts in 2/4 time. However, some traditional tune versions add a ninth measure to a part (*Billy in the Lowground* and *Hell Among the Yearlings* come to mind). Just as well, some tunes solidly within the fiddle tradition have measures (sometimes the final measure, sometimes not) which contain an extra beat. (*The Rough Scotsman*, as played by Lyman Enloe, is an example). Such additional beats are obviously not mistakes and should not be penalized as such. But, where the scoresheet explicitly requires that the music be "danceable," a problem arises. Many forms of group dance (e.g., contra dances and western-style square dance) have regular, patterned figures which are "synchronized" to a rhythmic standard of eight measures per part in strict 2/4 time. The dancers are, in effect, "cued" to their movements by the musical phrases within the tune, and any variation from the rhythmic standard is unsuitable. Looked at strictly in this light, tunes that are metrically "irregular" could not be considered "danceable." Nonetheless, other forms of dance have no such requirements.

The best practice is to clarify this question specifically with the CA and the senior judge before the contest starts. Any rule which is developed should be shared with the contestants before the contest starts and should preferably be made a part of the rule-sheet. At any rate, a fiddle judge needs to be able to distinguish simple "mistakes" from a set version of a tune. This requires that the judge start a foot patting when he hears anything out of the ordinary, and try to determine if the metrical irregularity is repeated in a fixed pattern (indicating it is an established part of the tune). Note that some scoresheets deal with this problem by providing that the "tune of choice" need not be "danceable."

Tempo

Scoresheets frequently provide deductions for "rushing", or "slowing down." Similarly, many scoresheets advise that points should be deducted if the fiddler plays "too fast" or "too slow", or if the tune is not played at a "danceable" tempo. The following discussion treats these two different aspects of tempo.

Consistency of tempo

"Rushing" and "slowing down" usually refer to consistency of tempo (as opposed to simple speed) and are easy criteria to apply. Generally, keeping your foot patting throughout a lot of the piece will tell you whether the fiddler slowed down or speeded up. Consistency of tempo is an important and very objective test, and points should be deducted where appropriate. Don't forget, however, that some tunes may have a legitimate tempo change between parts, particularly when the meter changes (*Comin' through the Rye* and *Carnival Waltz* are examples), although such tunes are infrequently played in contests.

Speed

The other aspect of tempo is the speed at which a tune is played (assuming that it remains consistent). Although measurement of tempo is quite objective, deciding whether the tempo is appropriate for a fiddle contest involves subjective judgment. Since old time fiddle music finds its origin in dance, "dance tempo" is a reasonable standard to apply. In fact, many scoresheets explicitly require that tunes be played at danceable speed. Nonetheless, this does not finally answer the question. A certain tempo might provoke one crowd of dancers to yell "where's the fire?", and another group to start shouting "put a coal on it!" Put another way, regionality and dance-style are both determinants of "appropriate" dance tempo. Thus, it is difficult for a judge to make any iron-clad presumptions about tempo. Provided that the tempo is within generally danceable boundaries, no fiddler should be excessively penalized.

Note that it is sometimes easy to confuse other aspects of fiddling with tempo. A fiddler's clarity or lack thereof with the bow can certainly affect perception of tempo; e.g., some smooth fiddlers can play at a fast tempo and yet sound deceptively slow. Similarly, lack of emphasis, or "accent," can make a tune, particularly a waltz, seem to drag.

Emphasis

"Emphasis" generally means distinguishing a downbeat from other metrical points within each measure. Emphasis can be created by bow pressure or bow speed, by sustaining a downbeat note slightly, by vibrato, by bow attack, or by other techniques. Many times it is created by some combination of the foregoing. Emphasis is a quality that brings vitality to a performance and frequently separates a great fiddler from a competent one. It is a crucial part of the thing called "drive" that makes good fiddling what it is.

"Proper emphasis" is frequently a separate scoresheet category. Where it is not explicitly made a part of the scoresheet, it should be scored under "danceability", or under one of the "subjective" categories (see below), such as "expression" or "feeling."

Miscellaneous rhythmic matters

Syncopation and hemiola (playing a duple figure against a triple figure) can both give the illusion that the fiddler has "lost the beat." Every judge should start his foot tapping immediately on sensing any metrical "problem" to verify its origin.

Note that some dances require different metrical patterns in the first and second parts of the tune. *Comin' through the Rye*, with one part in 2/4 time and the other in 3/4 is a good example. Obviously, the fiddler should not be penalized for an appropriate or traditional variation in meter.

The subjective categories

Music is appreciated in an essentially subjective fashion, traditional music perhaps more so than art music. Not surprisingly, almost every scoresheet contains one or more implicitly or explicitly subjective categories. This is the area where the experience and background of the fiddle judge is most important. A number of typical categories or concepts are discussed below.

Variation/Creativity

At the outset, it is helpful to distinguish "creativity" from "variation." We've all heard fiddlers play *Sally Goodin'* "27 different ways and still not be done." The problem is, we might step over to the next camper on the festival parking lot and hear a different fiddler play the exact same 27 parts. Certain brands of fiddling have incorporated "studied" variation of this sort as a stylistic requirement. This type of variation indicates that the fiddler has memorized more notes than a fiddler not playing multiple parts to his tune; it may also make the performance more listenable or enjoyable and deserving of extra points. On the other hand, it doesn't indicate anything about the fiddler's creativity. Of course "creativity" is not confined to improvising on stage; a fiddler may have innovated, then studiously practiced, tasteful variations on the standard melody. The problem is that the judges really have no way to know whether the fiddler is A, freely extemporizing; B, playing his own practiced variations; or C, playing rip-off parts.

Another problem that comes up occasionally is a tune that, for one reason or another, is traditionally either played "one-and-one" (ABAB), played AABB but without melodic change in the endings, or even played as two 4 measure "parts" each repeated 3 times (e.g. John Ashby's *Pretty Little Widow*). In such cases, the lack of "variation" is pronounced. Nonetheless, such tunes can, through their very repetitiveness, obtain a hypnotic hold over the musicians, dancers, and listeners alike, and sometimes provide a supremely fulfilling musical experience. An experienced judge would not penalize such tunes out of hand for lack of variation.

Difficulty of Tune

Occasionally somebody steps to the stage and plays a fiddling tour-de-force (e.g., *Clarinet Polka* in three flat keys) that all competent judges would recognize as a difficult rendition. There are also some three-finger tunes that stand out as easy (a guy would have to cut-up on *Boil Them Cabbage Down* pretty well to gain "difficulty" points). Such performances are the exception however, and there is probably no snakier category to judge than "difficulty of tune." Practiced fiddlers realize that until you play a tune yourself, you don't really even know if it's difficult for **you** to play, much less somebody else. Sometimes the pitch range of the tune tells us that the fiddler is playing double-stops cleanly in third position or above, or we hear bowing extravaganzas that could only be duplicated by Scotty Stoneman on Benzedrine. But usually a judge will have no certain idea about the difficulty of a tune. Even if the judge recognizes one or two contestants' tunes as difficult, how can he be sure the other contestants' tunes aren't as difficult? The point is, a judge should be cautious in assigning or detracting points based on difficulty of tune.

Authenticity

This term has a number of meanings and nuances that many times are not spelled out by scoresheets where the term is used. Some typical interpretations are discussed below.

"Old" vs. "new" tunes or versions of tunes

Some contests require that tunes played be "at least fifty years old" or be of some other arbitrary vintage. Unless the contestant is fiddling "Achy-Breaky Heart," such a criterion poses significant problems for the judges. The origins of most fiddle tunes are lost in history and trained ethnomusicologists frequently disagree on their antiquity. It follows that most judges won't be capable of dating tunes on the fly. Unless a tune is clearly inappropriate, the best policy is to consider that all tunes played meet the test, whatever (or however silly) it is!

Stylistic considerations

Some contests require that tunes meet some test of stylistic authenticity. (e.g., in some Canadian contests, double-stopping in waltzes may cause a penalty; in some Appalachian contests, playing a waltz on single strings may be penalized). One scoresheet calls for point deductions for "inappropriate modern licks." The key here is to follow the dictates of the scoresheet; and where the scoresheet is silent, be aware of local tastes.

One of the most difficult tasks for a judge is judging across clearly distinguishable styles (e.g., Canadian and Texas). Ideally, the divisions of a large, nationally-oriented contest should be set up to avoid this type of mixing. But where contestants playing different styles are competing directly against each other, the judges' only solution is to try to ignore the element of style, and judge the "pure" fiddling.

"Proper" versions of tunes

Some contest judges score down if they hear a version of a tune played in an unusual key, or with additional parts, or with a variant melody. This type of judgment requires a lot of presumption on the part of the judge. For example, *Sally Goodin'* doesn't get played in the key of G very often, but I've heard a couple of great versions of the tune played there. Similarly, I've heard third and fourth parts to *Stony Point* that enhance and improve the typical two-part version. For a judge to deduct points just because **he** isn't familiar with the particular version being played does a disservice to the fiddler and verges on the dishonest. Of course, where parts are melodically, rhythmically, or stylistically inconsistent with each other, the judge is free to levy his opinion.

"Feel"

An accomplished violinist could play the dickens out of a piece of fiddle sheet music, yet we wouldn't sense he was a fiddler in any meaning of the word. This quality of "feel" gets at the essence of fiddling, as it's distinguished from violin performance per se. Nowhere is the mettle of the fiddle contest judge called into play more than in this category of judgment. It usually requires several years of experience in playing and listening to different varieties of fiddle music to adequately judge this category.

Expression

In one contest "expression" was one of the scoring categories. After the third fiddler had started his first tune, one of the judges turned to another judge and asked "What do I do with this guy, he ain't got no expression on his face at all???" This judge had obviously missed the point.

"Expression" is the quality of the performance that distinguishes the sound of a live player from computer-produced music. It is comprised of all the nuances of fiddling - dynamics, slight shifts in tone and bow attack, and fine manipulations of meter (subtle syncopations, etc.) One scoresheet states that "Flat, mechanical, unfeeling performances will result in loss of points." Another scoresheet defines "expression" as "the quality of the performance that appeals to the listeners' feelings, reflecting the performer's judgment and ability in capturing and conveying the sentiment of the composer or the traditional associations of the tunes." Judging this category requires not so much a specialized knowledge of fiddling as a general sense of musical quality.

Tune Categories

Most contests require the contestants to play particular categories of tunes. These usually consist of a hoedown, a waltz, and a tune of choice. A "hoedown" is usually interpreted to mean a tune in 2/4 time, played at a danceable tempo (see above), and structured in two or more eight measure parts. "Reels,", "Breakdowns," and "Hornpipes" (when played in non-dotted rhythm), all seem to meet this test. Usually, any tune in 3/4 time is considered a waltz, although some contests may (very legitimately) place additional strictures on this category. The problem usually comes in the "tune of choice." Can you play another hoedown or waltz, or do you have to play a rag, a schottische, or some other kind of tune? Does it have to meet the "danceability" or "authenticity" requirements imposed on the other categories? The best policy is to clarify these questions with the CA before the contest begins.

Final analysis on "subjective categories"

The whole idea here is that most judges will ignore all the criteria, segmentations in the score sheet, musical terms, etc. and pick out the "best fiddler." An 'honest' scoresheet recognizes this inevitability by giving anywhere from 50 to 60 percent to a completely subjective (without further breakdown) analysis of the quality of the fiddling. This is the area where good fiddle judges are separated from merely good musicians. All good musicians know meter, rhythm, pitch, tone, etc. Only the good fiddle judge knows the rest.

The Practical Process of Assigning Points

You'll eventually find yourself seated at a table with two or more other judges and the contest underway. What do you do now? Every fiddle judge has a slightly different process for actually recording scores on paper, but the following hints may help you develop your own style.

It's a good idea to get some initial impression down on the scoresheet for each category (at least for the "detail" categories) after the fiddler's first time through the tune. You can usually get an immediate sense of whether the fiddling is well in tune, drastically too fast or slow, and whether the tone is appropriate. It is also helpful to get a fairly quick impression down about the general level of fiddling ability (see the section below on "bracketing" of scoring). You can then use the remainder of the time to refine your initial judgment (taking points off for sour notes, dropped time, etc. and adding points for good fiddling). Waiting until the tune is over to write anything down can put you behind the eight-ball, forcing you to make snap judgments in several categories before the next tune gets started.

It's also a good idea to keep a running tab of your scoring. If the fiddlers are identified by name you can do this by writing down the contestants' names and the scores you've assigned to them. If the

judges are hidden, you can write down the contestants' numbers, the tune titles, and the scores assigned. This practice will enable you to look back and get an idea where to place the current fiddler. Most CA's won't let you retrieve your scoresheets to make corrections, and there is no sicker feeling than to realize that you gave a mediocre fiddler a "92" early in the contest and later gave a really great fiddler a "91."

Assuming that there is no restriction on the range of scoring, how do you score a really bad fiddler? The sympathetic approach suggests assigning just few enough points that the bad fiddler can't possibly get in the prize money. This is nice, but can interfere with accurate scoring later in the contest. It also gives the fiddler (if he examines the scoresheet later) a false impression of his abilities.

Miscellaneous Topics

Picking Judges – General Qualifications

Do you have to be a fiddler to judge?

Not necessarily. Persons who are good instrumentalists, and have accompanied fiddlers regularly, either at contests, in jam sessions, or in a band, are quite able to judge fiddling. This is, however, the minimum requirement for judging. Persons who are good musicians but who have not had extensive experience around the fiddle (e.g., local music shop owner, country music disc jockey, high school music teacher, etc.) should **not** be called on to judge fiddling.

"Certification"

Attempts have been made over the years to "certify" or "license" persons as fiddle judges. One national organization formerly administered a "test" to persons applying for certification. That organization has now dropped the testing in favor of a letter of recommendation from the local fiddlers organization. Provided that the officers of the local association are impartial, this is as reasonable a scheme as any for attempting to "certify" judges. The same national organization also requires that a judge be at least thirty-five years old to be "certified." The age rule certainly doesn't guarantee anything about the experience of the persons it includes; a person 70 years old may have only been listening to fiddle music for a couple of years. The rule seems to presume that persons under thirty-five can't possibly have the experience and knowledge about fiddling that is required to judge it. I leave it to the reader's own experience to evaluate the truth of that presumption. Consider, however, that a number of excellent fiddlers have <u>died</u> before they turned thirty-five (including Harry Choates, the great cajun fiddler who passed on at age 29).

Training

Some organizations have set up training sessions for persons wishing to judge. Such sessions can be very productive in terms of teaching and exchange of ideas, and should be encouraged. Attendance at such sessions, however, shouldn't be an absolute requirement of judging.

Using last year's winner(s)

Contests sometimes require last year's winner(s) to judge. They do this for various reasons: 1) it's an easy way to get judges; 2) it ensures that the judge will be an "expert" in fiddling; and 3) it keeps a really good fiddler from winning the contest every year. This sounds like a

good scheme, but it has drawbacks. Not all persons who are good fiddlers make good judges. They may not have the concentration or the temperament to judge well, or they may have a real aversion to judging their peers. Or, they may simply not enjoy that type of work. Mark O'Connor was quoted as saying once that, "They asked me to judge [Weiser] this year but I don't think I can. It would be like a brain test. I'm not ready for six days, twelve hours a day. There are so many scratchers out there, 350 contestants." Also, in many cases successful contest fiddlers may object to working for the pitiful pay that judges generally get.

In any event, the contest incurs a risk of getting incompetent or unwilling judges, or running a fiddler away from your contest for good. There is nothing wrong with asking last year's winner to judge, but barring him from the contest if he doesn't is a poor practice.

Using the competing fiddlers

Some contests have actually had the currently competing fiddlers work in shifts judging the fiddlers they are competing against. This is an excellent idea if you are trying to add a spontaneous boxing or tag-team wrestling match to your event. Otherwise, it should be avoided. Some contests however have drawn judges from one division to judge another (e.g., "seniors" judge the "open", and vice-versa) and that format produces more acceptable results.

The Number of Judges

Normally, three judges are selected to judge a contest. Any fewer can result in allegations of unfairness. Nonetheless, some Scottish and Irish contests have only one judge. In those instances I have witnessed, the judge was a preeminent practitioner of Scottish fiddling, and his judgment was beyond reproach or question. Larger contests that can afford the pay are well advised to hire five judges. This gives the luxury of being able to throw out the top and bottom scores, to prevent any single judge from unfairly affecting the composite score. Three judges are generally adequate, however.

Hiding the Judges

Some contests choose to place the judges in a location remote from the stage. The contest is then piped in on speakers, and the line to the judges is turned off while the names of the contestants are announced. This arrangement offers one clear advantage in that the judges are not so affected by crowd noise and commotion, and can concentrate better. It also offers the possible advantage that the judges will not know the identity of the particular contestant being judged. Nonetheless, many judges will immediately recognize fiddlers (particularly locals) just from the style or sound of their fiddling, and their tune selection. Being separated from the crowd (and thus from observation) may also tempt the judges to discuss the on-going contest.

Separating the Judges

The purpose of separating the judges by at least a few feet is to prevent copying of scores or discussion (either trivial or about the contest). Some contests require expressly that the judges not talk to each other or discuss the contestants, at least until the scoresheets have been turned in for that fiddler. Separating the judges not only insures this result, but also makes it clear to the public. For those that think this is just theoretical, let me give you two examples. In one contest,

where the judges were seated together inside a judging tent, the judges spent the last half-hour of the contest discussing coon-hunting, women, and hard liquor. These discussions became obvious to some of the contestants and made more than a few mad. In another contest, one judge told me that another judge consistently look at a third judge's scoresheets. Examination of all the scoresheets showed nearly identical scores from two of the judges. The judge who was cribbing the other judge's scores probably felt unconfident about his own judgment; in that case he should not have accepted the judging assignment. NOTE: putting the judges in completely different parts of the contest area accomplishes the goal but creates administrative problems. Somebody has to run around and pick up the scoresheets, and the judges have no way to communicate on legitimate topics such as sound system irregularities, re-starting tunes, instrument malfunctions, restroom breaks, etc.

In any event, if all the judges are reliable and disciplined, the CA and contestants won't have to worry about their discussing the contestants or copying scores.

Paying the judges

Unless there is a special relationship or agreement between the CA and the judges, the judges should be paid for their work. Sitting and concentrating for anywhere from two to twelve hours is labor, and should be compensated. The amount will naturally vary from contest to contest. Those events with plentiful sponsorship (especially those undertaken for profit) should expect to pay the judges between fifty and a hundred dollars for a days work. If the judges are invited from out of town, the event should also try to take care of milage, lodging and food expenses. But many contests simply can't afford those wages; and it seems out of proportion for a contest to offer two hundred dollars in prize money and pay the judges the same total amount or more. When a low-budget contest requests my help judging and can't pay the standard amount, I'm willing to do it for less (twenty-five dollars is about what it takes me to break even for gas and food). I believe that those persons who are qualified to judge have a responsiblity to work occasionally for less than they are worth. The alternative for the CA is to hire local people who are willing to do the work for free. That usually means inadequate judging which detracts from the event and does nothing to promote fiddling.

Agreement between the judges on scores

Some contests require the judges reach a consensus on a score for each fiddler. The MC gives a minute or between contestants so that the judges can confer and establish a single score for the most recent contestant. This is not an especially good idea, and can result in one or two judges dominating the process. True "agreement" is a result of mathematical compilation of the individual judge's scores.

"Centering" and "Bracketing" of Scoring

Inexperienced judges sometimes score early fiddlers too high, then have no room at the top for the better, and much better, fiddlers later on. But usually judges tend to score early fiddlers low. Possibly this occurs because the judges are consciously avoiding early high scoring. I'm not certain of the real reason, but I know it happens in many contests. It has resulted in many fiddlers appearing late to the contest to try to get a high playing number. The possibility is that the judges aren't concentrating enough, or aren't "into" the music enough at the start of the contest. One contest manager, in frustration over this question, had the first fiddler play to let the judges "practice" scoring

him. The contest then started, and the first fiddler played at the end of the contest for points. That "warmed-up" the judges, but was really unfair to that fiddler. One cure is a "warm-up" round with each fiddler playing one or two tunes. The judges score the round, but the scores are tossed out. This is pretty effective, but costly in terms of time. Also, the fiddlers don't seem to especially appreciate the concept.

A better alternative is "centering" the scoring. This can be accomplished most simply by picking an "average" score (say 80), then scoring around that. Even more effective is the use of a system of "bracketing" (90 to 100 = excellent, 80 to 90 = good, 70 to 80 = average, etc.) Although it's nice if all the judges have the same brackets (it makes the scores appear more in line), it's not necessary, since each judge will apply the same brackets to each fiddler, giving even scores in a relative sense. This method lets the judge use a quick initial impression of the general fiddling abilities of a contestant, then refine the scoring within set parameters. In any event, it's good if the judges take time to have a thorough discussion of this issue before the contest. Note that one large contest restricts the judges to scoring between 89 and 99 total points, with 94 being average. This simply doesn't give the judges enough room. Additionally, if there is more than one category of points, then keeping track of addition gets hard.

The best protection an individual judge can have against this problem is to keep a running tally (on a piece of paper separate from the score sheets) of the scores he has given to each contestant. If the judges are "hidden," then the tally can incorporate tune names to help the judge remember who he scored how. With such a tally sheet the judge can keep track of where he is placing the early fiddlers, and have more assurance in assigning scores to the later fiddlers.

"Ranking" Systems

As indicated above, the fact that one judge might score **all** fiddlers high, and another judge score **all** fiddlers low, doesn't create any unfairness. A problem does come up however when a judge scores most fiddlers low and then gives his favorite a very high score, or scores most fiddlers high and then bestows a very low mark on a disfavored fiddler. For example, judges A and B score excellent fiddlers in the 90 to 100 range, and give Fiddler 1 a 90; judge C scores excellent fiddlers in the 80 to 90 range, and gives Fiddler 1 a 97. This practice effectively allows one judge to decide the winner of a contest (or throw any fiddler into the losers' bracket). Further, an examination of the biased judge's scoresheet for a single fiddler doesn't reveal what has occurred.

As mentioned, one cure for this is having 5 judges and throwing out the high and low scores. Another more complicated remedy is a "ranking" system. Under this system, the result of any single judge's scoring is an ordered list of the fiddlers. The highest-scored fiddler then gets a 1, the second-highest scored fiddler a two, etc. The lists from the different judges are then combined and the "lowest" score wins. Under this system, no matter how high Judge C scored Fiddler 1, Fiddler 1 can do no better than a "1" position from Judge C. If Judges A and B scored Fiddler 1 in 3rd and 4th positions, Fiddler 1 will have a difficult time winning the contest. Two problems with "ranking" are that the administrative task of compiling the scores becomes much more difficult, and the fiddlers may not understand, and thus become suspicious of, the scoring system.

Conclusion

Don't feel discouraged by the volume of information, ideas, and suggestions set out above. The real qualifications for a fiddle judge are an intimate knowledge of and true appreciation for fiddling, the willingness to concentrate, and a dedication to fairness. If you have those attributes you'll make a good judge. BEST OF LUCK!

Contest: _____ Date: _____

Contestant: _____

Name _____ Number _____ Division _____ Round _____

Judging Standards			*Tune Titles*	*No. 1*	*No. 2*	*No. 3*
	TONE (in tune, pleasing tone)	**25 pts.** A = 21-25 B = 16-20 C = 11-15				
	TIMING (good tempo, rhythm, & beat)	**25 pts.** A = 21-25 B = 16-20 C = 11-15				
	EXECUTION (old-time sound, solid performance, good overall)	**50 pts.** A = 41-50 B = 31-40 C = 21-30				
						Point Total

Judge: _____

Name, number, or initials

Contest: _____ Date: _____

Contestant: _____ _____ _____ _____

Name Number Division Round

Judging Standards		Tune Titles	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3
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Name, number, or initials