

# A Message from the Editor

## What Contesting Teaches Us

Contesting is fun. If you're reading this column, you likely agree with that statement. Anyone who does not probably doesn't even know that this column — or *NCJ* for that matter — even exists. But things that are fun can also be useful. Even something as seemingly self-indulgent or frivolous as playing video games can develop and refine hand-eye coordination, which is a valuable skill. Just ask the military. And contesting, I would argue, does refine and reward useful skills.

Let's start with the pure operating aspects of contesting — banging out the contacts. Contest contacts are efficient exchanges of information, with a premium placed on accuracy. These exchanges often take place under challenging conditions, and that can be valuable in many other contexts.

Listen to your non-contest spouse read your credit card number on the phone sometime. Or listen to a non-contester ham running an emergency net in the wake of a natural disaster. Is that the way you would do it? Maybe not. We're used to making ourselves perfectly clear — saying or sending something once in a way that gets it across with minimal time and effort. We use the phonetics, the cadence, and talk power that the job requires.

But it's not just broadcasting information. It's communicating it, and making sure it's accurate — asking for confirmation, and responding in kind to others' requests. Listen to the pause and the hesitation of a less-experienced contester when you ask for a fill or you correct something the operator has wrong. With contesters on both ends, this process is seamless and accurate. When a contest station flips from send to receive, the contester is ready that instant for whatever comes at them.

Yes, it's silly and useless information, in the bigger picture. But if it is a blood type or a home address that needs to be communicated in the wake of an accident or emergency, those useless skills would suddenly become very valuable. Contesters have them.

Modern contesting involves processing a lot of information, too. I'm in awe of the picture of RTTY contester Jeff Stai, WK6I, in action during a contest at the K5RC station that ran in his *NCJ* profile a few issues back. Just look at it: three radios, three computer keyboards, four computer mice, and four computer screens. Cutting-edge RTTY contesters are using three radios at once these days, with complex computer scripts and call sign stacking that allow

them to put their brain to work every single moment to complete a contact.

I've never worked as a trader on a financial exchange, but the pictures of them working don't look all that different from what Jeff is doing. And just like those traders, there's no pause button in a contest. There is a certain degree of mental stamina required, and contesters have that.

And behind every successful contester is a successful contest station builder — typically the same person. The technical skills of building a contest station remain within the skill set of most of us, but a well-engineered station is essential, no matter its size. Getting that accomplished within whatever resource constraints you face is a never-ending project management task.

Contests themselves will help you to identify your most pressing needs. It might be nothing more than curing your line noise or making your rotator more reliable. Or it might involve a more substantial investment or redesign. Making your post-contest evaluations, drawing up plans and carrying them out is as much a part of contesting as calling "CQ test."

Does this mean the top contesters can all quit their day jobs, sell their contesting talents, and earn big salaries? Obviously not. But it is interesting to note that many top contesters are very successful in their "real world" jobs, with plenty of spillover between what they do on the job and at the contest station.

## The Learning Process

How do we teach these skills to non-contesters and add to our contest ranks? Getting good at something is one of the best ways to make that activity more attractive and rewarding. Those who try contesting but never acquire the skills to improve and to realize success are much less likely to keep at it and become contesters.

I am not sure I have the answer. Many things that hams of my vintage did to learn the basics — making CW contacts in the Novice bands and being active in CW traffic handling — just aren't there anymore. Learning how to operate by participating in Field Day or — I hate to say it — listening to contests can teach you *how not* to do it as easily as anything else.

Two contests I just participated in are cases in point. The first was ARRL November Sweepstakes phone, one of the oldest operating events in existence and still a mainstay of the US contesting calendar. The contest has two unique features: a long exchange, and allowing only one contact between stations for the entire contest, regard-

less of band. Plenty of new contesters are in my log; most of the time you can tell that they're new, because the year the operator was first licensed is part of the exchange.

A growing number of new phone operators have somehow adopted the words "please copy" as part of their exchange. You could say the phrase has gone viral. It really doesn't add much time to say it, true, but I find it kind of depressing nonetheless — because it is the antithesis of useful innovation. It is something that adds time and effort with no return. And it is slavishly imitated.

The second weekend's competition, the CQ World Wide DX CW contest, brought another bad habit to light, failing to identify regularly. Instead of adding useless information, this habit removes what is arguably the most important piece of information we have to share — our call signs. In the mistaken belief that such behavior increases rate, the habit of stations not to transmit their call signs regularly when running pile-ups has spread like a plague.

N6MJ piloted ZF2MJ to nearly 10,000 contacts that weekend, yet identified frequently. KL9A, operating at TI5W, had similarly awe-inspiring contact totals, while also transmitting his call sign consistently. In contrast, I counted 19 consecutive contacts by CU4DX with no call sign, and he probably wasn't the worst offender. You could tune the dial in the afternoon to the dozens of pile-ups being run by stations in areas favored by propagation, and I'd venture that 75 percent of them were signing their call signs far less frequently than they should have been.

Learning good habits by listening to winners doesn't always work very well, and there are too many bad habits to imitate as well.

## NCJ Editors are Special People

This issue of *NCJ* carries articles from two familiar sources — former *NCJ* editors Kirk, K4RO, and Carl, K9LA. What a delight it is to work with these folks who have given their time and talent to keep this great publication going. These are the people who say "yes." Kirk continues to support *NCJ* by serving as our webmaster, and Carl's "Propagation" column carried on for many years after his extraordinary tenure as editor ended.

Another past *NCJ* editor is also in our thoughts — Tod Olson, KØTO, who died in November. It was a long time ago that he made *NCJ* happen, and its value over the years is a tribute to his idea and his hard work. It was a thrill to see him inducted into the CQ Contesting Hall of Fame. On behalf of all *NCJ* readers today and in the future, thank you, Tod.