

A Message from the Editor

The Evolution of the Contest Experience

People say I look young for my age. Or at least they used to. Either way, I've got to admit that I am actually a pretty old geezer. I actually remember the days of vacuum tube radios, swishing VFOs, and paper dupe sheets. And I remember, with some nostalgia, the contest experience of that era.

I am not talking about the contests themselves. It's amazing how little of each contest I *do* remember, even after just a few short weeks. But in the days of print media's dominance, when long-distance telephone calls were exotic and you had to wait until the next in-person club meeting to share rumors and gossip, I remember the way in which we all learned the about outcomes of the competitions that we had poured our lives into winning.

Of course, that was in the score listings in the magazines that sponsored the events. There was a thrill in just seeing your call sign listed, — an indelible record of your achievement, large or small. If things worked out, perhaps you'd see your call sign in one of the leader boxes. Perhaps the biggest thrill of all was making "the writeup" — being mentioned in the articles that we all breathlessly read and re-read to relive our collective experience.

I don't think that experience has changed a bit, actually. I know it hasn't for me. I get just as big of a kick out of seeing my call sign listed in the contest scores and in reading the story of the contest. I hope you do too. But in the Internet era, we clearly get that information in a completely different way. Since this is the information age, the amount of information that we can get and the speed with which we can get it have changed radically.

As the new editor of a print publication dedicated to — and sponsor of — contests, that radical change presents an enormous challenge.

We don't learn about how contests turned out from magazines anymore. Well, at least mostly. Aside from a few cheaters who get disqualified or a handful of folks who really like to keep things secret, the whole story of the competition is told on sites like 3830scores.com, right after the contest is over. We learn who won and who lost. We read their stories. We see our call

signs in the listings the very next day.

What that leaves the magazine and periodicals like *NCJ* to do is to certify the results. There's a little drama there, but not nearly as much. It's a bit like watching an NFL referee come out of the replay booth and announce the results of the review, except that, in this case, the review takes months, not minutes.

Of course, there are also the results articles that accompany the results, and especially in the hands of great writers like NØAX or K3EST, those are still great. But even the best prose comes to us later, after we've already indulged ourselves in the countless 3830 stories — some very well told — that appear the next day, when the entire contest memory is still fresh.

What's a print publication to do?

The obvious answer to many is simple: Put it on the net. Package it all up — writeups, scores, and all — in electronic format that can be searched, archived, and downloaded. Of course, the electronic format frees authors from space limitations that may have cramped their styles. An electronic format lets results article authors indulge themselves in different slants, plentiful sidebars, and photos galore.

As great as that sounds — and, in fact, actually is — it still doesn't change the fact that the official contest writeup has lost its monopoly status of telling the "story" of the contest, and those of us in the business of putting those writeups together must keep that in mind. We have to seek out the stories that have *not* been told, big and small, and put them together in a way that helps you to relive the contest's excitement and keep you engaged. That's a tall order, but we'll try to fill it.

Referee Fatigue

Competitions are fun, but adjudicating them is *not* — especially ham radio competitions, where what we do to produce our scores isn't always easily observable to judges or to our peers. It seems to have gotten worse in this Internet Era. Not only are there a lot more ways to cheat these days, but the Internet has given everyone a 100 kW ERP squawk box, so they can howl, if things turn out contrary to their liking.

This issue of *NCJ* touches on just one technology that promises to put more pressure on contest judging — remote stations. I realize it's not new, but the ability to buy

off-the-shelf products to accomplish this or even to rent the capability from a vendor is a more recent phenomenon. As N6TR describes, it can be an incredible marriage of broadband and ham radio that preserves the essence of our hobby while opening up new capabilities for the space-constrained to get on the air.

He doesn't go into all of the ways in which it could be used to subvert the meaning of ham radio competition. He doesn't have to. Everything — from having a far-away buddy line up multipliers for you on your second radio while you claim Single-Operator, to using a receiver in Tokyo to help you sort out the low-band Asians calling you — is clearly possible.

If you have an ethical "light" that goes on in your brain to tell you it's wrong when such opportunities present themselves, then good for you. I'd like to think that we all do, but for those of you that do not, I have a message. For the sake of the competition we all love, you should stop.

The fatigue of those asked to judge competitions is real. The time, resources, and stress of trying to figure out who is and who is *not* playing fair is beyond the capabilities of even the most motivated and deep-pocketed contest sponsors. One possibility is that the judges walk away. That's essentially what happened to the HQ competition in the IARU HF Championship Contest, which the ARRL decided it no longer could attempt to judge.

The other possibility, something none of us want to see, is that the competition becomes meaningless, either because a cheater's scores are allowed to stand, or because everyone cheats.

So, I ask each of you to think for a moment. Are you being nice to your referees and judges? Keeping well away from ethical gray zones and accepting without complaint the decisions of those who judge contests will keep them happy and let us all keep enjoying the sport we love.

Losing a Great One

The recent passing of Carl Cook, AI6V, reminds us all of the truly great people who have shared our hobby and sport. The comments, stories and reactions of all of the people touched by Carl's generosity and friendship have been truly touching. Let's always be thankful of the great ones who are still among us.