

# A Message from the Editor

## What Makes Contesting Work

Hams are justifiably proud of making contacts that don't depend on commercial communications networks. The readout on the S meter of the station we're talking to is the product of our efforts — our station design, our antennas, and our knowledge of propagation. Even in an age when we enjoy split-second communication with the other side of the world at the click of a mouse, pushing a signal across the world with the boxes in our shacks and the wires in our backyards — and nothing else — remains incredibly satisfying.

Of course, contesting pushes that simple notion of communication to an entirely new level, by giving us the thrill of contact thousands of times in a given weekend, letting our stations and strategy play out into a competitive game we've learned to enjoy. Yes, you can turn on your computer and use the Internet to enhance your contest experience — and many do that so often they almost forget any other way to operate. But the essence of ham radio contesting is that energy leaving your antenna and arriving at the station you're working.

But if you think the contesting experience depends solely on the stuff in your shack and the cooperation of some ionized particles floating a few hundred miles up in the sky, think again. The fact that so many talented people give generously of their time — and sometimes money — to support the basic infrastructure of contesting is mostly unseen and unacknowledged. But without it we wouldn't have the sport.

## The Sweat and Toil of Managing Contests

As we so often tell our spouses and friends, we really don't *win* anything when we run a contest, beyond pride in the achievement. And the people — the volunteers — who make that achievement meaningful are a vital part of the experience. They produce, refine, and post the rules. They collect, analyze, and adjudicate the results. They publish the results, maintain the records, and reward those submitting scores of merit.

It is because of the work of volunteers — particularly for the major events on the contest calendar — that many of us put so much time into and get so much enjoyment out of running contests. Much of their work is routine, of course. Perhaps even a bit tedious. There's nothing glamorous in

arranging the engraving and mailing of 150 plaques for the CQ WW, and badgering the sponsors for their annual support. But there are at least two aspects of contest management that can produce burnout for the volunteers involved.

The first one, to put it baldly, is dealing with cheaters. The fact that a tiny number of people think it is appropriate to cheat in order to win puts more strain on volunteer resources than anything else. For the CQ WW in particular, the human hours of time devoted to problems caused by a tiny number of logs that you can count on one hand is incredible. Remote receivers, illegal power, log padding, "extra" operators, or using Internet spots — the number of things that a cheater can try to improve their score is ever growing.

But the talent and tools used to discover and expose those who cheat are growing. Yet this "contest within a contest," pitting good guys against bad guys, is ultimately wearing. Rendering judgment upon cheaters in contests — those who knowingly and willfully flaunt the rules that others obey — is a stressful exercise that yields very little satisfaction or joy.

Another aspect of contest management is something I would call crowd control. You start with the fact that, in the biggest contests, there can be tens of thousands of participants. In groups of that size, consensus is impractical — probably impossible. Then you add the Internet, which gives every malcontent an equal voice, and you have the daily grind of running a contest.

Most of us realize that contest rules are ultimately a compromise, balancing the benefits of consistency with the need to change to reflect changing circumstances. But the discussions that periodically blow up on various reflectors about contest rules are too often anything but balanced. It is an unfortunate dynamic on reflectors to see "trolls" injecting provocative comments into discussions and watching as others take the bait.

This is the high-profile part of contest management — making the calls on disqualifications and contest rules. But other, less-obvious contest support activities don't get much recognition. The people who spend evenings and weekends checking the logs — running log-checking software of their own creation, and making sure mistakes are caught and corrected. The folks who maintain the web pages,

keep the log submission robots running, and distribute, mail, and often pay for the certificates and plaques.

Perhaps you would keep on contesting, if all of that vanished. Perhaps we could all simply get on the air on a given weekend, and post our self-computed scores on a list someplace. Maybe your score would be on top. But for me, that would be a little like dropping your golf ball in the cup and calling it a hole in one, instead of having all of your buddies see it go in from the starting tee. So hats off to the contest managers and volunteers who keep things running and give us that thrill.

## Should All Contests Be the Same?

I have been contesting long enough to remember when the ARRL decided to change the rules of its DX contest in the late 1970s. Instead of the world working just W/VE, the ARRL contest that year permitted DX-to-DX QSOs, similar to the WW. And what was the result? The next year the rules went back to the way they had been. It wasn't because they were unsuccessful — there was a lot of activity and scores were high. It was because it changed the *personality* of the contest.

Contests do have personality, for better or worse. From the DX side, the ARRL contest is all about racking up states and provinces and running rate, for those fortunate enough to have decent length openings to North America. In places like India or Singapore, I suspect it's not much of a contest. But neither is the Worked All Europe Contest from the US West Coast. We're lucky if we can hear the US side of the contact when stations in the Northeast are running Europe on 80 meters in August.

Contest exchanges, of course, are another unique touch. Operator age in the All-Asian Contest, the message preamble exchange of the ARRL November Sweepstakes, and even the QTCs sent and received in the WAE give these competitions their distinct stamp. Whether that is good or bad — and I happen to think it's good — it's likely to remain that way. So, performing well in those contests is going to involve embracing their unique aspects.

The contests managed by *NCJ* — the North American Sprint and the North American QSO Party (NAQP) events held twice a year — have their own personalities as well. The Sprint, of course, is like

no other, thanks to its QSY rule. This much-celebrated aspect of this contest is intended to reward search-and-pounce talents — something that the advent of SO2R contesting has clearly changed. And the short duration of the Sprint has made the CW version of that contest a QRQ event as well. Helping to make the Sprint a bit more accessible to those whose CW receiving skills don't go as high as 45 WPM might be a worthy goal as well.

The NAQP is a less-forbidding, more generic contest in almost every way. Its simple exchange, band-by-band multiplier counts, and low power format have made it one of the most popular domestic contests around. And yet there are distinct differences. The maximum power is 100 W, there is no club competition, and there is

no category for single operators who utilize spotting assistance from the Internet.

Should those aspects change? Perhaps. But there is something depressing about making a contest like NAQP more like every other contest around, with the key clicks and splatter of amplified signals about, a handful of clubs in big population centers duking it out, and hordes of mouse-clicking spotting zombies descending on every CQ sniffed out by the CW skimmers. The nice thing about the NAQPs — from my perspective, at least — is that they are thriving despite *not* allowing these things. I, for one, will continue to celebrate those aspects that make the NAQPs distinctive.

## **The Energizer Bunny of Station Builders**

The “NCJ Interviews” segment returns in this issue, and what a subject we've found for you. Read K1AR's conversation with the Rev Paul Bittner, WØAIH, for a glimpse at just how bright the light of enthusiasm for station building and all of ham radio burns in western Wisconsin. Contesters are rarely accused of being ordinary people, and, even by that standard, what Paul has accomplished over his years as a contester, station builder, ambassador for radio, and genial human being is truly remarkable. Now in his 80s, he's still going strong, looking forward to completing new projects and plans. What a treasure to have in this great hobby of ours.