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A Message from the Editor

The arrival of spring means different things to different contesters. For station owners, it's time to think about inspecting your guy anchors or perhaps rolling up your radials and low-band listening antennas. For others, it's time to get those mobile stations tuned up for the slate of big state and regional QSO parties. And for just about all of us, it's getting time to jump into a car or plane and head to the annual gatherings of hams and contesters at Visalia and Dayton, to meet and greet new and old friends, and to share stories and tricks of the trade.

These spring gatherings are as much of a ritual as running the CQ WW in the fall. There's something vaguely comforting about returning once again to the same place, hanging out with your friends, attending the same forums and venues, seeing what's new and what's the same. To my mind, they resemble contests themselves, as you mentally check off the familiar contest calls on the name badges of the people you see strolling past, and the number of conversations piles up.

Spring, to my mind at least, brings about one other seasonal change. That is the end of the major contest season. For HF contesters, that is. The CQ WPX SSB contest at the end of March is the bookend for me and my normal operating plans. Don't get me wrong, the contests that follow are wonderful events. But with the arrival of warmer weather, the urge to step away from the sport for a spell, and perhaps even doing a bit of antenna work, becomes very strong.

Reviving the Perennial Debate

Spring is also the time when the final results of the fall contests are published. For the American sponsored contests — the CQ and the ARRL competitions — those results continue to draw a distinction between terms we have all learned to understand: Assisted and unassisted. Those who use Internet spotting information, and those who do not.

In the days when spotting networks were on amateur packet networks, that was a fairly clear distinction. Either you connected to your local packet cluster node, or you did not.

Now there are dozens of Internet resources that bring valuable, real-time information to contesters' attention, and many of these are seamlessly integrated with logging software. On CW and RTTY we have skimmers, serving up spots at an astonishing rate. Hams continue to innovate on using the data — everything from tracking the competition, devising algorithms to choose the best band, and participating in real-time scoreboards. Doubtless more innovations lie in the future.

Connecting to the Internet while you operate is becoming as routine as turning on the light in your shack. The "buzz" in some of the recent DXpeditions to Southern Hemisphere islands is as much about the real-time information served up on their websites as it is working the exotic locales on the air. There's no question, at least to my mind, that the Internet has made operating more fun. It's not substituting for on-the-air experience as much as it's enhancing it.

But the Internet has changed the on-the-air aspects of operating, particularly with the advent of *CW Skimmer*. We know things by looking at our screens that we used to have to work very hard to discover by ear. The foolish — and inaccurate — operator trusts the screen too much, but even with a non-negligible error rate, the information in skimmer spots is golden.

Skimmer spots are the "secret sauce" to the complex multi-single operations coming out of Europe that are blasting the records to bits. Skimmer spots have turned contests such as the Russian DX contests, which give much higher point values to working Russian stations, into "clickfests," with less time CQing for lower point value QSOs. The addiction to skimmer spot data is so strong that some have advocated some form of high-speed CW identification to be embedded in SSB CQs, so that the machines can find these signals and put them into the pipeline too.

And yet the two major contest sponsors — ARRL and CQ — continue to maintain an unassisted category that ring fences all this technology and promotes the same vision of "a boy and his radio" that has prevailed in contesting before the information revolution arrived. Does that make sense?

The Pro and the Con

Some have said that this conversation — among contesters, that is — is no longer productive. People are talking past each other, and no one is being swayed by much that is said. This may be true. But the people who can and do make decisions on how contests are administered are listening and watching. So, let the debate on the merits of combining the single operator assisted and unassisted categories begin!

Well, maybe not. It's hard to debate yourself. And in case you haven't noticed, there's only one author of this column. Guest opinions for future columns are welcome. But let me at least frame the issues that a productive debate should address.

The first question to get out there is simple: What problem is combining categories trying to solve? It isn't popularity. CQ contests in particular are the most popular contests around. Participation may decline with the declining sunspots, but the trends are strongly up. Perhaps the choice of operating either with or without an Internet feed is part of the popularity? Perhaps not.

Some have said that eliminating unassisted would make results more comprehensible by cutting back the number of categories. In principle, such a move could cut the number of single operator categories in half! As a pretty seasoned contest operator who has built a fairly big contest station, I am okay with this. Others with more modest hardware and skills may see this as a setback, though, since it might make it a lot tougher to win.

Those who oversee the contests are very familiar with what may be the deciding issue — enforcement fatigue. People who report their scores as unassisted, yet receive the kind of assistance that should classify them as assisted, are the bane of volunteer judges and scoring committees. I think there are three distinct "problem" categories.

The first are the cheaters. Those who use spotting assistance, benefit from spotting assistance, and then lie about it when they submit their logs. They can be detected, in some cases. The more you find and disqualify, the more you wonder how many cheat and are *not* caught. It's not a fun job.

In the second category are the guys I would call "gray area" contesters. Much like the religious debates on how many angels can land on the head of a pin, these contesters thrive on pushing the limits of every definition in the rules, in their zeal to find an edge on their competition. Suppose I show the call signs and the band of stations spotted. Is that a spot? Or suppose I delay spots by 5 minutes. Is that still real-time information?

These contesters force continuous interpretations of the rules, but sometimes only after they are caught. Perhaps these gray area contesters get some satisfaction out of their rule stretching and reinterpretations, but they drive contest adjudicators nuts.

The third category of transgressors I would call the innocents. They may have come of age in operating when it would never even occur to them that using Internet spots wasn't allowed, because they've never operated any other way. Or maybe they're not aware of the default settings in their contest software that prepared their Cabrillo file.

Is combining categories the solution to these problems? That is one question to be addressed. The second question: What new problems would combining create? The final decision, I would argue, involves evaluating the tradeoffs involved in whatever decisions are made.

I should reveal my biases and say that I am squarely in the "don't combine" camp, for a lot of reasons. I'd love to tell you what those are. Perhaps next issue.