

A Message from the Editor

“CQ Field Day.” Ham radio has plenty of obstacles as it struggles to thrive and grow. The allure of instant, intercontinental communication isn’t what it used to be, as we know. It can be depressing to meet people — intelligent, worldly people — who, upon finding out that you are a ham, blurt out, “Does that still exist?”

Whether through brilliant planning or just dumb luck, hams have always had an incredible avenue to introduce young and old alike to the essence of what we do — communicating over the air. And that’s ARRL Field Day.

Field Day is one of the few things in life that you can allow yourself to be nostalgic about and look forward to at the same time. Field Day is how many of us learned about radio, about contesting, and about radios, and about people we knew nothing about before. And, it’s still a huge rush to tune across the HF bands, packed with signals and operators who come from every corner to operate, on that fourth weekend in June.

Why has this event remained so durably popular? It certainly draws folks from all walks of life. People who like to camp and cook. Those who have no chance of putting up “real” antennas and salivate over the chance to see what one can do. Clubs upholding traditions. Emergency preparedness enthusiasts. Even voyeurs, who seem content to, well, just watch.

The key to contesting is *what* they watch. After the last tent stake is driven and the last coax connector soldered, they watch people operating on HF, running a contest. For many hams, let alone non-hams, that can be a unique experience. And it is a timeless aspect of Field Day that some are drawn to it like moths to a flame, just as we all were once. While others chat and sniff around, they are fascinated to watch a real contest operator put QSOs into the log, efficiently and quickly, and they seem to share the thrill of a good run, even if they don’t understand it all yet.

I say Field Day is a gift to the recruitment of future contesters, yes. But what most of us do next is fumble the ball. The fish get away from us, because we just

pack up our gear and go home. What we should be doing is handing these newbies a card of sorts — with a follow-up engagement that keeps them plugged in. Maybe it’s an invitation to a contest gathering or to visit a multioperator station during a contest — the August NAQP is a perfect event to plant the contest seed. There are far better contests than Field Day, which is a more informal affair and not *really* a contest, despite the competitive spirit that prevails each June. Sadly, many of those who may find themselves intrigued by our sport never get to experience them.

The Education of Bad Conditions

Life is about learning. If we’re doing it right, then we’re always doing it better. Lessons learned in contests come in all flavors, from station preparedness to sleep strategies. But one of the most basic lessons is simple perseverance. DX contests are facing a healthy dose of adversity these days, with the dearth of sunspots and the occasional solar flare putting the polar paths into a deep freeze. But one lesson of contests is that the essence of competition doesn’t change with the solar wind.

I saw that in action in the 1990s, approaching a sunspot minimum, when I was lucky enough to be a 20-meter operator at the K3LR multi/multi station for a DX contest. I say I was lucky, because, as we’re now seeing, 20 meters can be the last band standing when the MUF crashes, and it certainly did on that weekend. My operating position gave me a great view of the 15-meter team of K3UA and N3RA, who worked hard to squeeze every contact out of their short European opening on the first day.

When the sun came up on the second day, the realization that 15 just was not going to open up to Europe hit us all like a ton of bricks. The point of the cycle when you see once-productive openings wither away for the first time brings on a sense of grief. If I were one of the 15-meter operators, I might have gone for a walk or started thumbing through a magazine. But Phil and Scotty didn’t. They kept glued to their seats, swinging the beams south, calling

CQ in Spanish, and generally attacking the band with just as much enthusiasm and energy as they has the day before, when the band was open to Europe. And they had fun doing it.

As easy as it can be to slink away and lick your wounds when the bands underperform, the recipe for success remains the same: Pressing on just as hard as ever.

On the Upswing in Zone 26

Even contesters have to admit that our sport is only part of what goes on in the larger hobby of ham radio. I’m no historian, but my sense is that contests took hold here several decades after the hobby itself got established.

But in Thailand, now home to the third highest count of Amateur Radio operators of any country in the world, contesting played a huge role in re-establishing the legitimacy and growth in an activity that as recently as the early 1980s was illegal, with hams subject to equipment confiscation and arrest. The role of contesting during those trying years — demonstrating the goodwill and international competition of our sport — played a pivotal role in restarting and reshaping one of the true success stories of recent years.

We’re proud to share with *NCJ* readers a bit of that history in this issue, as told by Tony, HSØZDX/G4UAV. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we did bringing it to you.

A Contesting Light is Extinguished

The fire of competition, station-building, and sheer operating enjoyment probably burned as brightly for Pat Sonnier, W5WMU, as it did for anybody in contesting. Who of us hasn’t put the “Willie Mike United” call sign down in our contest logs on any given weekend? Sadly, we can’t do that anymore. Pat succumbed to heart failure on April 6, leaving two contest stations — his original station in Louisiana and his recently constructed station in Lubec, Maine — in the dark for the first time. His big signals, his distinctive voice, and his passion for contesting will be sorely missed.