

From the Editor

The Future of Contesting is Up to Us!

Hamvention® is upon us, and it always heralds the onset of spring in the Upper Midwest. I hope to see you at Contest University, the Contest Forum, the Contest Dinner, the Contest Supersuites, and in the Flea Market. Stop to chat, if you see me.

The Readers Speak

It was refreshing to have an *NCJ* reader reply to my last editorial. He made a number of excellent points and suggestions. Two more readers have written in too. I'm delighted our readership is engaged!

One of our correspondents mentioned downloadable contest certificates. We now have certificates, thanks to support from Steve Ford, WB8IMY, at ARRL Headquarters, and Bruce Horn, WA7BNM, who will post them on our website. We anticipate these will be available starting in the fall.

"Casual contester" seems to be a common thread among those who write us. Many assume *NCJ* is targeted at the owners and operators of US and Canadian Superstations. It is not! In fact, I suspect none of the big station owners glean much

from *NCJ*, as they have already figured out what many of us have yet to learn and apply. *NCJ* is targeted at radiosport newcomers, advanced and experienced contesters, and those somewhere in between — which probably is where the casual contesters fall. We work diligently to offer content in every issue that appeals to this spectrum of readers. We recognize that more than half of all who get on the air for a contest are casual contesters, who enter a contests to achieve personal goals with limited time and/or energy. They are there to have fun and improve their scores. Nothing wrong with that. Most hams enter a limited number of contests a year. The K3LR superstation K3LR enters both CQ World Wide DX contests and both ARRL International DX contests. Tim's teams often win or place second, but their goal is to dominate in those four events. Yes, K3LR may be on for other contests, but often as a single operator or multi-single entry and not the *Team de Force* that Tim recruits for the Big Four. Casual contesters allow the Big Gun stations and intensely serious, contesters the opportunity to make many more contacts.

In short, contests would not occur without casual operators.

One reader suggested that *NCJ* was promoting elitism. I understand those feelings, but that is not our goal. First, contesting attracts competitive personalities. Many of us want to get better at radiosport and ultimately win. It is normal to feel a sense of "I need to improve my station" after reading of some of the success stories in *NCJ*. Embrace those feelings and sort out what is reasonable for you to do at your station.

It is also important to understand that contesting plays to *geographical advantage* or *geographical privilege*. Stations located at lower latitudes, closer to the US East Coast, in general, will outperform all other US stations, all other factors being equal in a DX contest. Proximity to large numbers of European contest stations allows East Coast contesters to hear and work more stations than most of us. After noticing that a top-tier contester in Indiana was working more than twice the DX stations on 80 meters as I did, I wrote him about my 80-meter array and asked about his. He pointed out that WØAIH 80 miles



The 2019 US ARRL International DX SSB winning multi-multi team at K3LR. [Courtesy of Tim Duffy, K3LR]

east of me in W9 Land never could work and hear what an Indiana station could work on 80 in a given contest, despite having the same array. Why? It's largely due to the geographic advantage of being located further east in Indiana rather than Wisconsin. His comments helped me realize I needed to adjust my goals to reflect what is possible from Minnesota, rather than what is possible from the US as a whole.

The entire World Radiosport Team Championship (WRTC) qualification program plays to geographical privilege. My calculation suggests that the best opportunity to qualify for WRTC from the continental US would be to build a remote station in West Virginia but only a mile or so from the Maryland border. You'd have the propagation of a W3-Land station but compete against W8-Landers for WRTC qualification. Such a geographical privilege of being closer to the EU and AF stations than those competing from Ohio, Michigan, and the Michigan Upper Peninsula would give you a leg up on winning the WRTC qualifying round. Some might cry foul, but it is legal and even incentivized by the WRTC qualifying criteria. Geographic advantage is also the reason why many hams are buying land in Maine and installing remote stations there.

The bottom line is that the contesting playing field is not even. You have to decide if you enjoy the challenges of competing against yourself and your geographical neighbors or if you need to relocate to the Caribbean to be competitive. Most of us concluded long ago that winning or qualifying for WRTC is not important enough of a priority to relocate. And that is okay, just as casual contesting is okay.

Contesting and *NCJ*: It is Up to Us!

The notion of a digital edition of *NCJ* has been batted about for some time now, and I am pleased to report that ARRL Publications Manager Steve Ford, WB8IMY, has approved allowing us to move in that direction. We have permission to post the PDF copy of *NCJ* to our website, once we sort out the web IT security issues. It will not happen this month but hopefully in the not-too-distant future.

Discussions about a digital edition prompted the ARRL to survey contesters about *NCJ* and other issues. We have permission to share those results with you, which I will in future editions. The data have cemented in my mind that the future of contesting belongs to us, the contest community. This is our time to lead. We will rise or fall based upon our own actions and efforts to broaden the appeal of radiosport, attract new and younger adherents, and sustain efforts prompting manufacturers to innovate.

The contest community enjoys its activities, and in this regard is its own worst enemy. We frequently like what we have so much that we are not willing to accommodate the kinds of changes that might stimulate more activity or attract new contesters. Consider this: No change on our part suggests that contesting will slowly decline. Or, we can recognize that the world is changing and we should also.

I urge readers to strike up discussions among local contest groups, ham radio breakfast meetings, and contest club email chat groups about how we might inspire greater activity and appeal to younger radio amateurs. Most believe we should solely focus on youth. I disagree. Certainly we can target the youth demographic, but these folks will need 20 years or more to finish school, start careers, buy homes, and raise families before they have much discretionary time and resources. They are the future, but the *long-term* future. Exceptions such as Marty, NN1C, and Bryant, KG5HVO, are rare. I would welcome 100 young people like these two who embrace radiosport, but at this point, they're not out there.

So, I suggest that we target two groups of adults. First, we need to attract the 35 to 50-year old demographic. They've finished school, are established in careers, and have families that are grown or nearly so. This demographic cohort finds itself with some margin of time and money to invest in hobbies. Let's help them discover or rediscover ham radio and contesting. We work with, socialize with and attend community meetings with people like these; they are all around us and are one invitation away from getting active. Just ask.

Second, we need to recruit from among those who have retired from successful careers and now have time and a need for meaningful activities. Retirement is tough. People lose meaning with their efforts and lives. Ham radio and contesting can help fill those voids. Some in this demographic wanted to be hams when they were younger, and we simply have to rekindle the spark. Organize a ham radio open house some day in your community. Put up booths at community fairs, farmers' markets, and summer festivals. Wear your recruiting cap and talk about the fun you have with modern ham radio. Forget boat anchors. They won't care as much about old Collins or Hallicrafters gear as they will be intrigued by the new solid state rigs, SDRs and computer-to-radio technology.

I invite *NCJ* readers to propose innovative solutions to recruiting and mentoring new contesters. Share your ideas with us, so readers in the contesting community can benefit from your insights. Keep active on the reflectors and other social media. Float your ideas widely. Let's mobilize to ensure our future.

The future of contesting belongs to those bold enough to create it. Will you be a part of the future?

In this Issue

This issue has a mini-focus on VHF contesting, as a number of readers have requested. Enjoy the three articles we have for you on developing VHF contesting skills. I also hope you will enjoy learning what Tom Schiller, N6BT, has discovered with regard to vertical antennas. His insights are both fascinating and revolutionary. Carl Luetzelschwab, K9LA, reports about an anomaly in contesting, where geographic advantage shifted southward into Texas. His article is provocative. Doug Grant, K1DG, has provided a "hybrid" article on using your LCR to improve your contesting experience. The hybrid aspect is that audio files of the QSO examples are on our website, <http://ncjweb.com>.

Finally, we compliment Nathaniel Frisell, W2NAF, of Solar Eclipse QSO Party renown. He has been named Hamvention's Amateur of the Year for 2019. It is nice to see another *NCJ* author and contesteer win this prestigious honor. Well done, Nathaniel!