

A Message from the Editor

The Constant Surprise That is Contesting

You flip on your radio. What will you hear? That is one of the oldest questions in our hobby. From the Novice days, when hearing *anything* coming through your speaker was a thrill with a new radio, to the here and now, when the ebbs and flows of propagation and band activity are registered by your more experienced ears. There is always an element of surprise when you switch on the radio and spin the knob.

Of course, in this information age, the surprises are not necessarily registered by your ears or by the act of spinning a knob on the radio anymore. Your spectrum scope lets you look at the entire band at a glance, and your smartphone links into skimmer networks that tell you who is on the band, even when you're nowhere near your radio. Yet, this is just a change in the way the surprise of radio arrives.

That just makes the beginning of contest season all the more special. Not only do conditions change (and improve, for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere) with the arrival of the fall equinox, but activity ramps up, as stations all over the world finish their station building projects and fire up on the bands. The kick-off of the biggest contest of them all, the CQ World Wide SSB, is where the fun begins. Conditions and scores will surprise us all. Carrying on with Sweepstakes, the single-band contests, and the January NAQP, there is a ton of fun just ahead.

Contesting Still Reaching New Heights

In a world where it seems that everything is not quite what it used to be, contests in general, and HF contests in particular, are raising the bar nearly every year. The latest surge in log entries in the CQ WW contests has occurred since the midpoint of the last decade, when roughly 4,000 logs were submitted on each mode, to 2 years ago, when log entries roughly doubled. If past experience is any guide, we can expect very modest declines in activity resulting from diminishing sunspots for the next few years. And then?

I hope we are all around to find out. In the meantime, I would submit to you that, sunspots aside, these are the "good old days" of contesting. The technology, the demographics, and the skill levels of contesters are changing constantly, of course.

But, the point we are at right now is a nice spot to be.

I say this out loud because it is apparent from tuning the bands during non-contest periods that what you might call traditional HF operating — getting on the bands and working people — is not in this same happy state. We don't have hard data on casual operating in the same way that we have, say, log submission data describing contest activity going back several decades. But especially on CW and during times when there is no propagation to Europe, the bands certainly *seem* a lot less full than, say, 30 years ago. In fact, when we asked legendary contesteer K3ZO in a *NCJ* interview in 2015 what was different about tuning the bands today, he offered the same observation.

That change is probably not going to reverse itself, and it has several important implications for contesting. With stations scarcer during the week, the heavy participation during weekend contests is all the more jarring to casual operators. The grumbling over "contest QRM" has always existed, of course, but compared to the virtually QRM-free environment of a weekday afternoon, the torrent of signals from a major contest (or a DXpedition, for that matter) is off-putting.

The paucity of signals on the bands on CW in particular is a challenge for those trying to build up their code speed — which we all know is critical to enjoying CW contests. It makes it harder for newer operators to learn about propagation as well. Bands are open to places like Asia on 40 meters in the morning, but you wouldn't know it from the hams calling CQ, because there aren't any. Instead you hear YB fishing boats and BY radar.

It is interesting to see contests themselves filling this void. There have long been "mini-contests" taking place on weeknights in Russia and Japan. Now in North America we have them as well, as well as the internationally oriented CWT sessions. Perhaps a slower-speed CW activity could take hold as a means of helping newbies bridge the chasm between their own abilities and the rapid fire CW of your typical contest.

Club Competition Joins the Digital Age

There has always been something a bit

murky about club competitions in contests. The concept of competition as a team is simple and appealing. And if the allure of group participation increases activity, it is a win-win for everyone involved.

But the rules of club competition — there is the rub. They can be fiendishly complex. Or they can be virtually non-existent. Or just about anything in between. The team competition in *NCJ* contests isn't really about clubs at all — just collections of folks who sign up on online registration forms before the contest starts. On the other hand, club competition in ARRL-sponsored contests has always been about real clubs, with rosters, constitutions, and affiliation with ARRL.

Regardless of how it is organized, club competition provides a spark for many of us, even if its administration is sometime a headache. Having more drive and more purpose when running a contest is, I would argue, seldom a bad thing — even if it does occasionally require contest administrators to wade into obscure questions on eligibility, geography, or the allocation of multi-operator scores.

That's why it is heartening to see ARRL taking steps to streamline and modernize the club submission and scoring process. The new system, explained in this issue, really doesn't change any rules regarding club competition in ARRL contests, but it makes great strides in simplifying the whole process and rendering it more transparent. For the first time, folks will be able to easily see which scores are going into published club totals, which will really help demystify the tallies and tighten up the entire process. *Bravo!*

Getting Ready for Contest Season

When we featured octogenarian contesteer and station builder W0AIH as the subject of an "*NCJ* Interviews" piece last year, Paul's enthusiasm for his latest project — an 80/75 meter rotatable 3 element Yagi — came through loud and clear. Well, he's done it. If you want to see someone excited as he heads into this contest season, take a look at the drone videos of the installation (search for "W0AIH" on YouTube) and prepare to be amazed. Yes, that's a very young-looking and agile W0AIH on top of his tower, putting the finishing touches on a project most of us can only dream about.