

A Message from the Editor

And so another contest season begins. The anticipation and excitement of the upcoming contests are an exercise in renewal. Once again, the days get shorter, and, once again, propagation changes, and dead or dormant bands come to life. And the contests that — at least to my mind — remind you that the “big ones” are just ahead pop up on the contest calendar. The Scandinavian Activity Contest. The California QSO Party. And in the days leading up to the biggest contest in the world, the CQ World Wide SSB, enormous signals appear from all directions as world-class stations and operators set up and test their hardware from islands and coastlines around the globe.

And the ARRL November Sweepstakes is right behind. The oldest contest in the world has some of the strongest traditions — the Clean Sweep and the club competition.

Reality does intrude a bit on this escapist fantasy, of course. Some of those call signs we’ve become used to hearing have fallen silent since the last contest season, and their signals and their friendships are certainly missed. And this year the vicious destruction of the hurricanes that have wreaked havoc on the Caribbean will certainly impose a different sort of silence from the call signs in the countries and locations we’ve grown accustomed to see filling up our multiplier sheets.

Another reality is the decline of the sunspots. Will we even have 10 meters this year? It’s always tough to get a read on how the fall will be for the high bands, as we come out of the summer doldrums. But the kinds of conditions we’ve experienced in the summer — such as those during the WAE SSB in September when the biggest East Coast multis only managed to make 700 QSOs in a 48-hour contest — certainly haven’t fed our hopes.

But many of us have a sunspot cycle or two under our belts, and we realize that it not all bad news, especially for the low bands. And Ol’ Sol always serves up a surprise or two. Which of us thought that the solar flux would hit 200 as it did (briefly, regrettably) in early September?

Sunspots and the Radio Business

If seasoned contesters can put the approach of the solar minimum in perspective, the same probably cannot be said for newer members of our ranks. It’s harder even to hear DX, much less work it, when

the sun is spotless, for those who are modestly equipped. And the crowded real estate on the few bands that are open isn’t exactly welcoming for little pistols either.

If you think that’s a challenge for contesting, it has to be an even bigger one for the businesses and organizations that ultimately depend upon continued growth in our hobby for their financial well-being. Or for those on the ragged edge of survival, perhaps even their existence.

The business vitality of the ham radio marketplace isn’t exactly public information. The various dealers, manufacturers, member organizations, and magazine publishers are not always entirely transparent with their finances or have publicly traded stock shares, and I certainly don’t have any inside information to share. But it stands to reason that there is a correlation between empty bands and empty order books.

Many ham radio businesses are a labor of love or even a side business. Some are offshoots of larger businesses in related fields. Some are global businesses. In any given year, most survive, and some fail. The diversity of what they produce makes our hobby more interesting. The pressure from declining sunspots will be felt by many, and we shouldn’t take their existence for granted.

NCJ Contests

The health of contesting and contests is something we can all see. As this issue’s contest results demonstrate, the NAQPs, sponsored by *NCJ*, continue to be in great shape. Check out the QSO totals for the CW contest won by N2IC — *Wow!* Those totals look a lot more like the January NAQPs than summertime. The SSB weekend suffered some pretty abysmal conditions this time around, but all three contests continue to attract considerable activity.

This has been helped by the (privately sponsored) competition between three large contest clubs — NCCC, PVRC, and SMC — in recent years. But, it’s also just a really well-designed contest with simple rules, modest length, and an easy exchange that draws in newcomers. Perhaps the college competition being set up by SMC and announced in this issue will add to activity as well.

The *NCJ* Sprints are on a different trend. These events are clearly at the other end of the spectrum as far as “accessibility” to new contesters. The “QSY rule” that makes

them so unique is a little tough for the uninitiated to get a handle on. But, in years past the Sprints have attracted considerable activity and some remarkable scores.

Returning to those levels of activity — if it can be done — will be a challenge for CW. The activity in the last CW Sprint made the last half-hour pretty slow for many participants. The RTTY Sprint has had an even more severe decline, with current activity changing the nature of the contest. Better marketing, better training, and better follow-through on communication all could help this. But the question, as they say in marketing, is whether or not it is the soap we are selling that is the problem.

We’d like to hear from you if you’re *not* participating in the Sprints, or, if you are, perhaps with less enthusiasm. If the answer is, “Whoops, I forgot,” that’s one thing. But if there’s something about the contest that we could fix, we’re all ears.

Change at the Helm

Serving as your *NCJ* editor for the past 3 years certainly has been a labor of love on my part. The generosity, talent, and enthusiasm that you have demonstrated in continuing to support our contesting magazine has been fantastic. Giving back to this wonderful hobby has been a great experience for me, but, in truth, in many cases all I have really done is say “thanks” when a talented author or contributor sends a gift-wrapped article to my in box.

One of the most rewarding activities I have participated in with *NCJ* has been the “*NCJ* Interviews” series conducted by John Dorr, K1AR. In fact, if our new editor will allow it, we will be submitting these from time to time in the future as well. The history, the wisdom, and the stories in the brains of some of the most accomplished contesters in our midst is truly amazing. I can tell you that in the case of each of our interview subjects — including this issue’s conversation with K3EST — almost half of what is said ends up on the cutting room floor. Perhaps I should sweep up the remains some day and come out with a book!

I know that you will be in good hands with Scott Wright, K0MD, in the editor’s chair going forward. Any guy who knows how to take human hearts apart and put them back together again shouldn’t break a sweat putting together *NCJ*. I hope you will give Scott and his team the same support that has made this job so much fun for me.