

A Message from the Editor

The marriage of computers and contesting is now almost 3 decades old and continues to grow and thrive. Computers are such a good fit for the sport of contesting, because contests generate rivers of data begging to be processed. Call signs, frequencies, signal strengths. We use that data during contests to make strategic decisions. We use it afterward to evaluate our performance as well as that of our stations. Occasionally we suck up the data from entire contests to tell us all sorts of things — from what areas are most active to how contests grow and evolve over time.

Sometimes these data reveal trends in contests that can give us concern. From long tradition, two contests — the ARRL November Sweepstakes and the All-Asian DX Contest — include information in the exchange on the age of the operator. The All-Asian does it explicitly, whereas the “check” in the SS gives a good clue of operator’s age, judging by the year the op was first licensed. (The relatively new EU HF Championship does the same thing as SS). What those data reveal is telling. At least in Japan, the US, and Canada, contests are dominated by older operators, and casual observation suggests that the average age of operators is on the rise.

In at least one sense, we should congratulate ourselves on this accomplishment. Longer life expectancy, improved health in later years, and rising affluence all have helped produce this outcome. Not only are existing hams living longer, but in the US it is largely aging Baby Boomers approaching or entering retirement who have fueled the growth in the overall number of licensees.

Increasingly the new ham is a nearly retired or recently retired baby boomer who has finally found the time to play radio. So many new contesters are older as well, and that’s not a bad thing. To capture and retain some of these new, older folks into contesting is a great thing for our sport.

The concern, of course, is over the sustainability of the population of contesters into the future, if current trends continue. In particular, for aging baby boomers like me, it is disconcerting to see so few people discovering ham radio and ham radio contesting in their youth, as we did. In the

words of Fred, K3ZO, the subject of this issue’s inaugural “*NCJ* Interviews,” when he took the license test at the FCC office in his youth decades ago, the room of test takers resembled a middle school class. The data we get from contest participants make it clear that that kind of youth movement in contesting is simply not there.

I am hardly the first to make that observation. The world is full of hams bemoaning the lack of youth in the hobby. What’s harder to find are people who are trying to do something about it. The fun of contesting depends critically on having lots of contesters, after all. How can we help preserve and grow that population?

Nurturing the Feedstock

There is a supply chain for producing contesters of whatever age. It starts with ham radio, proceeds to setting up stations, getting on the air, discovering propagation, and finally having that first contest experience. Field Day is part of it for many of us. To my mind, at least, so is CW. At each step along this chain, interruptions can occur as life’s events sap our time and motivation. Getting a “push” from a friend or a club at these critical moments may make the difference between becoming a contester or doing something else.

That’s why the efforts of the relatively new CW Operators Club (CWops) are so encouraging. The organization is barely 5 years old, but it is making a mark on CW operating, as anyone who tunes the bands during its mid-week, hour-long CWT contests can attest. But what is most encouraging is its commitment to nurturing the feedstock of CW operating by helping new and experienced hams alike to learn and/or improve their Morse code skills through its CW Academy, described in this issue.

I happen to think that CW contesting is the most fun. Others will disagree, of course, but I think we can concur that you can get better results with a modest station on CW than on SSB — not to mention that others in the household seem to prefer the silence of a CW paddle over shouts into a microphone, as contests extend into the late evening hours. Getting newbie contesters going on CW, and rewarding their investment in time in improving their CW

ability with increases in contest scores, can be the final “hook” to entice them into our sport for life.

Hearing from the Great Ones

This issue of *NCJ* introduces a new, occasional feature, “*NCJ* Interviews.” Our goal is to tap some of the expertise, knowledge, and perspective of some contesting legends. Their time stretches back to an era when radiosport was different, but no less vibrant. How has contesting changed? What might the future hold for us? Our goal is also to have fun — to share some of the stories, and learn about some of the personalities who helped shape our favorite pastime.

John Dorr, K1AR, our host for these interviews, is a legend in his own right. John’s contesting resume is certainly impressive. During the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed like the only way to win the CQ World Wide CW for the US was to cut his coax. But, those of you who have had the opportunity to meet John know how bright the light of his enthusiasm and passion for contesting and contesting friendship burn. We can think of no one more appropriate to lead this new effort.

Our inaugural subject for this project is Fred Laun, K3ZO. It’s hard to believe there is a ham alive who hasn’t encountered Fred on the air, learned from his many posts and contributions on the Internet, or met him in person. Or all three. His contest career began in an era when US stations never called CQ in DX contests!

To listen to recordings of operating from earlier years is to hear just how much our sport has evolved since. Somewhere posted on the web are the old recordings that Fred made when he was in Vietnam (when XV was still on the “banned countries” list) of PVRC buddies such as W4BVV and W4KFC calling CQ in the DX contests. This was well before anyone had ever invented the F1 key. To hear these old call signs come alive through the crackle of static and QSB sends a chill down your spine.

Hearing from Fred about how the hobby has changed, and how it has stayed the same, makes fascinating reading. I hope you agree.