

The Thrill of it All

Contesting isn't just for, well, testers.

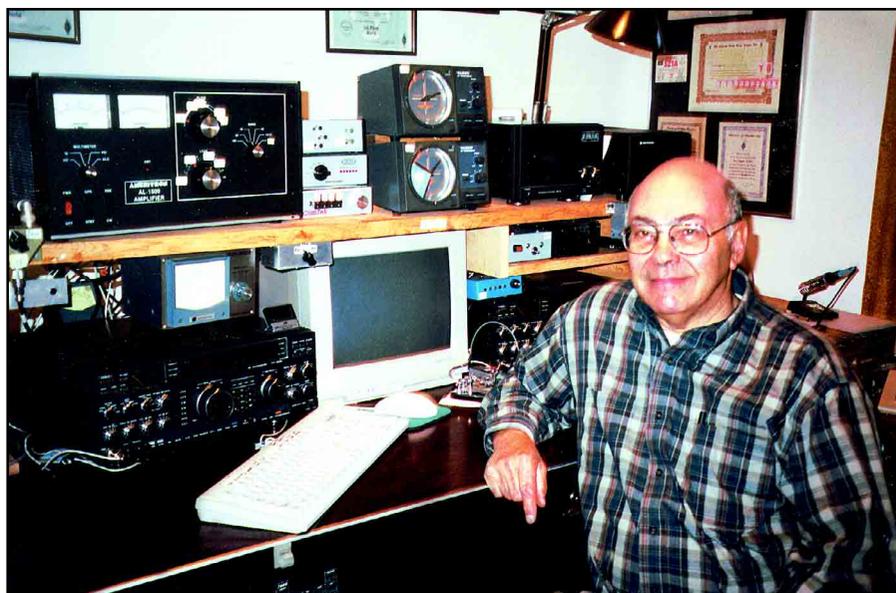
What a great avocation we have! There are so many interesting facets we can participate in. From homebrewing to slow-scan TV to PSK31 to microwave communications to satellites to ragchewing to DXing to contesting, and on and on it goes. Let me stop at contesting and tell you where I get my best kicks from Amateur Radio.

For me, it all started when I was a kid 50 years ago. Not long after becoming a Novice, I discovered contesting and a neighbor ham whose wire antenna I never had noticed, the end being in a tree only about 100 feet from my bedroom window. Roger Corey, W1JYH (now W1AX), was a top-10 HF tester in those days, doing amazingly well with modest antennas. After listening to Roger in both CW and SSB contests, and getting to meet him when he bailed me out of a problem with my new homebrew rig that blew its 807 tubes as soon as I turned it on, I decided to give it a whirl in a contest. I can't really remember my first contest, but it didn't take long until I was enjoying CW "CD parties" and Sweepstakes. Living a block away from another tester, we had a gentleman's agreement that if he came on a band, I would move to another!

It's Still a Blast

Almost fifty years later, I'm still enjoying contesting, both phone and CW, and want to share the thrill of it all with those who haven't yet given it a try. Let me wander through my log with you in the 2002 ARRL DX CW contest, and try to convey what makes it so much fun for me.

While monitoring the DX Packet-Cluster (an on-the-air and on-line DX and contest-spotting network) one hour before the contest, I saw P5/4L4FN spotted on 15 meters. Next to contesting, DXing is another favorite aspect of the hobby, and North Korea was the only country I hadn't worked. I tuned to his frequency and his signal was outstanding, a sure sign that the band was in good shape for the start of the competition. Within 10 minutes, North Korea was in



the log, and if acceptable paperwork gets to the DX Century Club desk at ARRL HQ, I will have worked every DXCC entity! I took this as a good omen for the 48 hour long contest about to begin.

About 20 minutes before the start, I checked the bands for propagation and it sounded like 40 meters was the place to be. While working a few guys on 7007 kHz, a Bulgarian station tells me I have the loudest signal he ever heard from North America. What a way to get psyched!

Off and Running

Zero Zulu and the contest starts. I have a clear frequency on 7003 and call CQ TEST DE W1WEF. Several stations call at the same time and I'm off and running.

In this contest the object is to work as many stations on each band, 160 through 10 meters, in as many DXCC entities as possible. Each station can be worked once per band. My computer logging program updates my score as I go, tells me if I already have worked a station (if you work him again on the same band, the contact is a duplicate, or *dupe*, and doesn't count toward your score). When I hear a DX station, the software also tells me I need his country on that band, and whether I need

that country on any other band. The computer even tells me my QSO rate for the last 10 Qs, or for the last 100 Qs, to help me plan my next move.

Back to the start of the contest. My first contact is with UX7IA in Ukraine. I enter him in my computer log, hit the INSERT key and the computer keys my radio and sends the CW exchange "599 CT." I enter his exchange, my signal report and his power, hit the + key and the computer sends "TU W1WEF" (translation: Thank you. W1WEF). The next station calls me from Slovenia, and the next from Croatia. I stay on 7003, working one station after another—known as *running* in contestspeak—and also send occasional CQs to rejuvenate the pileup. After 20 minutes in the contest I decide to search and pounce, tuning from the bottom to the top of the band and working any stations calling CQ. After 53 minutes on 40, I go to 20 meters and by the end of the first hour of the contest I have 116 contacts and 48 countries in the log.

Band Hopping

I find a clear spot on 14004 kHz. Twenty meters is in great shape. I stay on that frequency running mostly Euro-

peans with ZC4DW in Cypress, UAØZY in Asiatic Russia, and a few South Americans calling as well. At 0114 the run slows down, so I decide to search and pounce again to pick up the rate until 0141 when I move to 80 meters. I've been looking forward to using my newest version of a four square antenna on 80—four phased verticals suspended from trees with inverted V top loading and eight elevated radials on each.

Eighty meters has plenty of good European signals, and I can't believe I found a hole at 3501 kHz and managed to get a run going! After 35 stations are in the log, it's time to go to 160 meters. Around the top of the hour many DX stations move to Top Band (the affectionate moniker for 160 meters) and stay for 10 minutes or so. It's a bit early at 0200Z, but I log Isle of Man, Venezuela and France before going back to 80 meters two minutes later. I stay on 80 until 0250 when I revisit 160, and put 10 more stations in the log including fellow Yankee Clipper Contest Club member Kurt Pauer, VP9/W6PH.

During every DX contest, many contesters take off to set up or operate from existing stations in remote locations. I have had the pleasure of being sought after DX 10 times from PJ2, Curacao and three times from KH6 (Hawaii). DX contests are a good chance for casual contesters or DXers to look for needed band-countries that are not active outside of contests.

During this hour I revisit 40 and 160, but it's late in Europe and my rate is slowing down with only a 77 contacts per hour. At the same time, 160 is improving, and I pick up half a dozen new multipliers (see the sidebar, "Seek the Multipliers") in six minutes. Back to 80 for three more contacts and then to 20 meters, which is really hopping.

I operate with one radio in the Single Operator High Power category. Many contesters today are using two radios in this same category. While calling CQ on one band, they can tune another band looking for needed multipliers or stations they haven't worked yet. Running 1500 W, this takes good filters, stubs, antenna separation as well as skill to concentrate on doing two things at once. By changing bands frequently, and going into the search-and-pounce mode every hour I hope to find most of those needed multipliers.

Plenty of activity from Europe in this contest keeps it interesting. If anyone thinks CW is dead, take a listen to any of the six HF bands during the big DX contests! I have my computer CW speed set at 36 words per minute, a bit slower than usual, but I have my memory keyer and

Seek the Multipliers

Every contest has multipliers, often referred to as *mults*. These are US states, DXCC entities, ARRL sections, grids and so on, depending on the rules of the contest. A multiplier is valuable because it multiplies your total score.

Let's say that DXCC entities are multipliers for our hypothetical contest. You've amassed a total of 200 points so far, and in doing so you made contacts with 50 different DXCC entities.

200 × 50 = 10,000 points

Those 50 multipliers made a huge difference in your score! Imagine what the score would have been if you had only worked 10 multipliers?

If given a choice between chasing a station that isn't a new multiplier and pursuing one that *will*, most contesters will spend much more time trying to bag the new multiplier.—*Steve Ford, WB8IMY*

paddle connected in parallel with my CW interface to the computer. I send manually about half the time, and can quickly slow down by turning the speed knob on my keyer for anyone who answers me at a slow speed. Many stations that perhaps can't copy 36 WPM will listen long enough to copy my call, and then let their computer do the rest. The number of log submissions in CW contests has actually been increasing over the past few years.

Contesters set goals for themselves. One can just try to better his previous year's scores, beat a buddy in a bet for a steak dinner, shoot for a certain score, beat those guys who beat you last year or...try to win the contest! Knowing my own limitations, my goal this year was to beat those two guys in the club...and to be one of the top 10 single op scorers. Now I know I have to find more multipliers, and at the same time keep my rate up. I got carried away on 10 meters, having too much fun running the pileup and forgetting to search and pounce. The high rates are exhilarating, though, and I probably haven't seen a 194-contact-per-hour rate since Curacao!

I'm back on 15 for another 300 Qs. Lots of new multipliers here because it's still a fresh band for me. It's 1811Z and 3V8SM in Tunisia calls me. I know I need him on other bands because I haven't worked a 3V8 in the contest anywhere. I ask him to move to 20 meters, giving him the frequency to move to. He obliges with a quick contact on 20, and I move right back to my run frequency on 15.

Wow, am I hearing right? YA5T calls me from Afghanistan. I give my exchange

and he says "Hi, Jack" before giving his! I have no idea who the operator is, but camaraderie among contesters is unmatched in any other hobby. Contesters not only get to know each other from working over and over through the years in contests, but from Qs outside of contests and conventions like Dayton where contesters flock together and chat well into the night. It's really a pleasure to meet the guys you've worked from all over the world, with dozens of countries represented in the hotel where contesters hang out.

Now 10 is wide open to Japan and I run JAs with a couple ZLs (New Zealand) and South Americans mixed in, putting about 75 in the log during the next hour. I finish my first 24 hours with 2451 contacts and 357 multipliers in the log. Last year I had 2058 contacts and 359 multipliers at this point, but last year I had taken about three hours off by now to sleep. This year I still feel great and my preparation for sleep deprivation seems to be paying off. I got more sleep than normal the week before, and managed to sleep a couple hours before the contest started Friday afternoon. I deprived myself of my normal two cups of coffee for three days before, only drinking a half cup of regular and a half cup of decaf. I avoided eating turkey before the contest (since something in turkey makes me sleepy) and avoided a big meal on Friday. During the contest I also avoided my usual bag of snacks, like chocolate chip cookies, and ate less than usual. I drank regular coffee during the contest and diet cola.

Day Two

The first hour finds me on 10, 15, 20 and 40 meters. At 0155 I go to 160 and put 16 Europeans in the log, but spend too long there and my rate suffers, even though my Inverted L antenna seemed to be doing well at cracking pileups in short order. Back to 15 meters and I put about 50 more Japanese stations in the log before returning to 160 on the hour at 0300Z to nab four more Europeans and a YO (Romania) multiplier. At 0307 I decide that things have slowed enough for me to take my first off-time and I sleep for an hour and a half.

Back at it at 0500 I hit 80, 160 on the hour and then 20. Twenty was open around the clock last night and again tonight. I returned to 80 for European sunrise and another 60 Europeans in the log, a few more on 40 and a few on 20. At 0730 I decide it's slow enough and I'm tired enough to sleep, and I take almost 4 hours off. I get a good 3 hours solid sleep and manage to get out of bed when the alarm goes off. In past contests it's at this point

where I said "I'd rather sleep," and stayed in bed. But with conditions as good as they were (and maybe the best we'd see in a long time), I wanted to make my goal.

On again at 1114Z I pick up VK (Australia) and VP5 mults on 40 and go to 20 to run Europe. I put another 100 Qs in the log including HSØ (Thailand), YBØ (Indonesia), and C31 (Andorra). With 12 hours to go, the rate is slowing and I hop from band to band looking for new multipliers, moving VP2MDY to add Montserrat on 20, 15 and 10 meters and remembering what my old friend K1RM told me years ago: To win you have to work every station on the band! I started combing the bands methodically, keying every station's call into the computer to see if I'd already worked it, and finding that about one in five was a needed station! By now the calls all sound familiar, but this was really paying off, and I'd even find new multipliers every once in a while.

With three hours to go, CX2AL (Uruguay) moves for me from 10 to 15 meters. ZS6AJS moves from 20 to 15 to add South Africa on two bands. My good friend Fergus, YV1NX, moves from 15 to 40 to give me two more in the last hour. The last hour produces only 52 contacts with 5 new multipliers. It's all over at 0000Z and I'm not even tired!

How Did I Do?

I met my goal to beat my last year's score. I have a total of 3736 contacts and 443 multipliers. Last year I had 3336 and 422, so I'm quite pleased. Of course, this is my "raw score," yet to be checked when I submit my log and it is cross-checked against logs submitted by the stations I worked, I'm bound to lose

points. I just have to hope I don't lose more than my fair share!

I mentioned goal setting earlier, and knowing one's limitations. With this in mind, I know when I can feel good looking at results and seeing what kind of hardware I was competing against. By big-gun contest station standards, my station with one tower and tribanders is modest. I have a 108-foot tower with three stacked Hy-Gain TH6s and two Cushcraft 40-2CDs Yagis, and wire antennas on 80 and 160 meters. Contesters are known for planting antenna farms bigger than any others in the hobby. Multiple high towers and stacked monoband Yagi antennas are common. Continuous improvement is part of every contesteer's repertoire.

Within a couple weeks, most stations submit their raw scores to an Internet reflector that goes by the name "3830" (you can view the archives of the 3830 Reflector on the www.contesting.com Web site). Scores are tabulated before the official adjudicated scores appear in print eight months later, and to my delight I'm in sixth place! Even if I drop down a couple of notches, I should remain in the top 10. And yes, I did beat those two guys who whipped me last year, but I know they'll really be out to get me next time!

If you've never done it, give a contest a whirl. For more information about contesting, including rules and contest calendars, jump on the Web and go to the *National Contest Journal* site at www.ncjweb.com/ or the ARRL Web site at www.arrl.org/contests.

And to those who worked me and those who "moved," thanks for the thrill of it all. See you in the next one!

I was first licensed in 1952 after becoming interested in ham radio through a friend in Boy Scouts. In those early days I did a lot of homebrewing, both HF and VHF. From the start, I enjoyed CW, and developed my CW skills through participation in the National Traffic System. CD parties were probably the first contests I entered, and the contesting bug bit despite my very modest station. I also discovered Sweepstakes back them, but never did much DXing until I became active again following an 18-year hiatus after college.

In 1978 when I returned to the hobby, it was amazing to see how much equipment had changed. Almost no one owned a transceiver in 1960; we used separate receivers and transmitters. Now with a TS-520S and dipole I worked DXCC and WAS in a month! DXing and DX contests became a passion, and when I receive my P5 and Ducie cards I'll be back on top of the DXCC Honor Roll again.

I found mobile CW to be great company on long weekend drives, which I always seemed to be making while I was working. Now that I'm retired after a 32 year career in Instrumentation Engineering at Pratt and Whitney, my wife and I have been enjoying RVing about 2 months each year, but we always come home for the ARRL CW contest, and then head South again after it's over. Of course I have an HF rig in the RV!

I was fortunate to have operated in ARRL DX CW and SSB contests many times with my good friend John Thompson, WIBIH, from his place in Curacao, and together we took First Place World multi-single two or three times. From home, I've placed in the top 10 several times in the ARRL and CQWW contests, and especially enjoy the high speed CW Sprints. When I'm not contesting, I can often be found putting up a new antenna...or salt water fishing

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