

# Getting Technical

In my November editorial, I asked, “Where is Everybody?” referring to the many very quiet repeaters I encountered while driving to Maine and back on my summer vacation. Well, there are still plenty of quiet repeaters out there, but there are also some very active exceptions, which are generally attached to very active clubs. I’d like to highlight a couple of them in hopes that others can learn from their successes.

One common feature on these active repeaters, it seems, is a regularly-scheduled “tech net,” in which any and every technical question is fair game. One of the most active repeaters in northern New Jersey, where I live, is the Bergen County FM Association’s 146.79 “machine,” which hosts many on-air activities of the Bergen Amateur Radio Association (BARA), a very active club that doesn’t have its own repeater. One regular feature is BARA’s Thursday night tech net, hosted by Gordon Beattie, W2TTT. The net’s web page outlines the broad scope of such gatherings:

“Is there something in your shack or station that you do not understand fully and want explained? Have you heard a phrase or acronym that you don’t understand? Is there a topic of potential interest that you would like explained? Is there a technical element of the hobby that annoys or mystifies you?” In other words, just about anything related to the technical side of ham radio is fair game ... and one key is for the net control to be willing to answer what may seem like the simplest of questions, or the most complicated (or to admit it’s outside his/her area of expertise and see if anyone else on the net knows, or promise to dig up an answer by the next session). It’s also important to make participants feel comfortable enough to ask virtually anything, and to know that they won’t be ridiculed or criticized for asking what some might consider “stupid questions.”

On the other side of New York City, the Long Island Mobile Amateur Radio Club (LIMARC) is one of the most active anywhere, and its 146.85 MHz 2-meter repeater is one of those on which you can nearly always find somebody to talk with. Every Sunday night, what you’ll find there is a tech net, hosted by noted VHFer Dick Knadle, K2RIW. I was listening while driving last weekend, and Dick was talking about the Doppler effect (in which signals appear to change frequency if either the transmitting station or receiving station is in motion). This led to a story about airplane scatter on 2 meters—how, on a 900-mile path he regularly worked with another ham in North Carolina (yes, folks, on 2 meters!), airplanes at a certain altitude, at a certain point along the path, served as reflectors and briefly boosted signal levels by a significant amount. It was fascinating, covered a whole range of technical topics, and was told in such a way that it was hard to turn off the radio when I got home.

Then, this past week, I had to make a day trip to Boston. After making some contacts on a couple of the normally-active repeaters in the New York City area, I moved into a quiet zone that covered most of the state of Connecticut, and then I stumbled upon an active machine on 146.97 as I approached the Boston area. Turns out that this is the repeater of the Central Massachusetts Amateur Radio Association (CMARA), another very active club. I was invited, if I was still in the area that evening, to drop in on the club’s weekly—you got it—tech net. It turns out that I was, and I did. Greg Algieri, WA1JXR, runs the club’s “The Doctor

is In” net (borrowing a column name from that other magazine). There were some three dozen check-ins the night I listened in, and the questions ranged from an explanation of “picket-fencing” on an FM signal to RF exposure concerns if one was to install a 450-watt amplifier in a mobile HF station, with the antenna five feet behind the driver, on the trunk lid. (After some discussion, the ham with the amp decided that discretion is the better part of valor, that his rig’s basic 100 watts would probably be just fine, and that he’d probably be posting the amplifier on the club’s next swap net.)

Not all of the questions were (or could be) answered definitively; other net participants offered ideas when there wasn’t a clear-cut answer; and sometimes a questioner was sent off to try to gather more information about his question and come back the following week. Overall, though, the atmosphere was one of friendly explanations and discussions, with no question being too simple or too complex, and with any additional information or ideas being welcomed (even from a visitor who was just passing through).

This was all consistent with the venerable ham tradition of technical and scientific inquiry and, most importantly, of freely sharing knowledge and information with each other. It happens on the air, it happens at club meetings and at hamfest/convention forums. It is this tradition, and this spirit of openness and sharing, that helps keep ham radio vital.

I was in Boston with my wife, who was attending a professional conference for the day. Typically, in her field, you’d pay a couple of hundred dollars to hear a presentation on a given topic. I regularly receive flyers about conferences on various technical matters and the costs sometimes run upwards of \$1,000, not including travel or other expenses. Within ham radio, though, the same levels of knowledge and expertise are often available to us for the minimal cost of a hamfest admission or a magazine subscription, or for free on your local repeater. I’m sure I’ve said this in the past, but it bears repeating: The most valuable resource we have in ham radio is ... hams. For the most part, we are bright, well-educated, enthusiastic people with knowledge across virtually all areas of endeavor, knowledge we are generally willing to share at little or no cost to other hams. It is an essential part of what makes us unique.

Another type of knowledge that we need to share more often and more widely is what successful clubs do that makes them successful. Why do some clubs have always-active repeaters and 50–100 people at club meetings, while others have nearly-silent repeaters and struggle to get a dozen people to a meeting? What is the formula for success for those groups that are “doing it right”? Tech nets are part of it, but certainly not all. Interesting meeting programs are part of it, but not all (CMARA’s November meeting program, by the way, was on knot-tying for putting up wire and temporary antennas; BARA was having a member show-and-tell night; it also has a weekly kit night). If you’re involved with a successful club or repeater, we’d like to hear from you. What is your secret formula? How can other clubs adapt what you’re doing to build their own success? If we get enough input, we’ll put together an article.

Again, best wishes to each of you from all of us here at CQ for a happy, healthy and prosperous new year.

73, W2VU

*(Note: Due to space constraints, the CQ WW WPX Contest rules will appear next month. They will also be posted on our website by the time you see this.)*

\*e-mail: <w2vu@cq-amateur-radio.com>