

Learning to Hear

How do you learn to hear? This question came to me during Field Day, when I had the privilege once again of spending several hours operating at W2GLQ with members of the Nutley Amateur Radio Society in New Jersey. In addition to touching base with some old friends, I was pleased to see that nearly half the operators there were new hams, and that they were each having a great time. I spent most of my operating time with them, either logging while one of them operated or vice versa.

While the ARRL says Field Day technically is not a contest (just like it says ham radio isn't really a hobby), the on-air environment certainly sounded like a contest and the operators were having so much fun that most forgot that this was a deadly-serious emergency preparedness exercise and not a hobby competition. But they were also encountering a pretty steep learning curve when it came to making and logging contacts.

One new ham, not yet comfortable with the computer logging software, hand-wrote all of the information for each contact and then copied it later to the computer. Others were nervous about speaking on the mic, or hesitant to jump in and make a call for fear of being thought rude. I'm not afflicted with either of those concerns (at least not during a contest), but the one thing that set apart my skills from theirs, without exception, was my ability to pull call signs and exchange information out of the jumble of noise and signals that define the HF bands during a major operating event.

"How did you hear that?" I was asked repeatedly. "All I hear is noise."

My answer at the time was, "Practice. Experience. I've been at this for a long time."

But I thought about it more after I got home. Listening — as opposed to simply hearing — is something we're told to do nearly from birth. "Are you listening?" our parents and teachers would ask when they thought we weren't paying attention. If you're like me, your spouse still regularly asks that same question. Advice from successful DXers and contesters always begins with, "Listen, listen, listen."

Hearing, on the other hand, is an ability with which most of us are born. You don't have to *learn* it. Or do you? What if you *are* listening, but don't hear what someone else hears? This isn't a matter of paying attention, or of concentration, or in this case, physical hearing ability. What we're really talking about here is *discrimination*. How do you learn to separate the information that you want to hear from all of the noise that often surrounds it? And how do you teach it? *Can* you teach it?

I think you can, with a combination of "book-learning" (including magazines) and "hands-on" ("ears-on"?) experience, preferably with a mentor at your side. In his column this month, DX Editor Wayne Mills, N7NG, profiles a DXer who points out that his "DXing Elmers" advised him to "listen way down between the 'local' stations" to find the DX.

Learning where to listen helped him learn to hear more. It also helps to learn what you're listening *for* ... obviously a call sign, but also other basic information (in a contest environment, this would be the exchange info, such as category and section in Field Day). Once you know what you're listening for, you've made the first step toward being able to hear it.

One of the tools I've developed as a "search-and-pounce" contest operator is taking advantage of the fact that I'm not likely to get through to a station on the first call, especially if the other station has a small signal or a big pileup. So I keep listening between calls,

filling in the blanks in the exchange information. Generally, by the time I get through (and most of the time, with patience, I do), I've copied all the necessary info and the actual exchange with the station simply serves to confirm it. So I'm hearing the same information multiple times, and if I'm not 100% certain of it by the time I make the contact, I know exactly what to ask the other station to clarify.

Brain Conditioning

Another part of "learning to hear," especially in a contest environment, is conditioning your brain to the cadence of the information flow. What am I expecting to hear first? What's next? For the new hams at Field Day, the pace sometimes seemed a little too fast. Their brains hadn't had time to process the first burst of information before needing to absorb the next one.

I was reminded of this in the course of an e-mail discussion I've been having with a reader who feels that including signal reports as part of the exchange in the CQ World Wide DX Contest is a waste of time, especially since virtually every report is 59 or 599, even if you can barely dig the signal out of the noise. He suggested either dropping the signal report or replacing it with something less likely to be the same on each contact, such as a grid field or another bit of changeable information. This is a topic that has been discussed before, but interestingly, when the near-final revisions of the rules for the CQ WW were presented publicly for review and comment (more on this in a bit), the subject of changing the exchange never even came up.

Beyond that, though, my experience at Field Day made me realize that the signal report in the CQ WW exchange does play an important role—it provides a brief pause that lets your brain shift from processing the first info burst (the call sign) to processing the second burst (the zone). It keeps things flowing more smoothly, keeps rates up and reduces requests for repeats. So, even though the formulaic "59" or "599" in the CQ WW exchange may seem like a time-waster, it actually helps save time and is an important part of the process by which our brains hear and process information.

CQ WW Rules Revisions

Speaking of the CQ WW rules, we have made some pretty significant revisions in them and are presenting them in this issue. The process took several months, involving members of the CQ WW Contest Committee reviewing and commenting on proposed changes, several different versions from Contest Director K5ZD based on those discussions, and finally, an unprecedented period of public comment before the rules were finalized. We believe we have addressed all of the major concerns expressed by the contest community and, while you may not agree with everything (such as the exchange), we believe the new rules make everything much clearer, especially for participants around the world for whom English is not their first language. Our thanks to Randy and all the committee members, and to those contesters who added comments and suggestions, for all of your hard work in making this rewrite come together in time for this year's CQ WW contest. Randy explains the major changes on page 40; the complete rules appear on page 41.

We also have some tweaks in the rules for the CQ WPX Award. We didn't have space to include them in this issue (we'll try for next month), but they will be posted on the CQ website (www.cq-amateur-radio.com). From the home page, click on CQ Awards, then on WPX. Enjoy the fall weather and the beginning of the year's prime DXing season. Thanks for listening, and hopefully, hearing. — 73, W2VU

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