

Flipping a Switch

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Propagation continues to fascinate me, even after several decades, as I now enter my sixth sunspot cycle (I became a ham at the peak of Cycle 20 and knew nothing of sunspot cycles at the time). I've learned a tremendous amount since then, especially over the last several months as I've worked closely with Carl Luetzelschwab, K9LA; Ted Cohen, N4XX; and Caryn Eve Murray, KD2GUT, on the 4th edition of the *CQ Shortwave Propagation Handbook*. I now understand much more of the science involved and the mechanics behind the path that a radio signal travels when it leaves my antenna, and the possibly different path that is followed by a returning signal. But understanding the mechanics doesn't change the sense of wonder for me when I'm actually on the air, observing propagation in real time.

I was reminded of this during the recent CQ WPX SSB Contest. I had conflicts on Saturday but had time to operate on Sunday. When I turned on the rig mid-morning, I was greeted by ... nothing. I tuned around several bands and managed to make three or four contacts on 20 (the only stations I could hear) before shutting down to do other things. When I came back after lunch, 20 meters was hopping — the band was open to Europe and sounded like 20 should during a contest. I made a reasonable number of contacts, then stepped away from the rig for a few minutes. When I came back, it was like someone had flipped a switch! Europe was gone, completely. My only remaining contacts were with stations in the Caribbean and the northern part of South America. My “book-learnin’” and on-air experience had taught me to expect this, of course, but I was still amazed at how sudden and complete the change was. And I will continue to be amazed by — to steal a phrase from Contributing Editor AA6JR — the “Magic in the Sky” we are privileged to experience as radio amateurs.

Speaking of Contests...

As I was writing this, I received my log-checking report (LCR) from the 2020 CQ World Wide DX Contest SSB weekend. The level of detail in these reports is astounding, and can be really helpful to you in identifying your strengths and weaknesses. Your individualized report will show you each specific contact that had errors — often a miscopied callsign — including what you put in your log and what the correct info should have been. It also shows you which stations messed up your part of the exchange as well. For example, one station miscopied my call as W3VU and another as W6VU. This suggests that I need to be a little clearer in enunciating the “2” in my call (too bad there aren't phonetics for numbers!). I would also benefit from listening more carefully to the stations I'm working (my errors were in prefixes, which isn't surprising since there seems to be a tendency among some DX stations to rush through the prefix before carefully spelling out their suffix).

I'd like to take a minute here to thank K5ZD, K1AR, and all

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the other CQWW committee members involved with the “back end” scoring software that enables this level of detail to be collected, “crunched” and reported back to the entrant. I'd also like to thank the rest of the committee members for all of the incredible work that they do to make our contests the world's best. The full list of committee members appears that the end of the CQWW CW results in this issue. If you encounter any of these great volunteers on the air or elsewhere, please take a moment to say thank you for their contributions to amateur radio.

Speaking of World Wide...

Amateur radio is a world-wide hobby, which the FCC recognizes in the Basis and Purpose of the Amateur Radio Service as “the amateur’s unique ability to enhance international goodwill.” We have always tried to reflect our hobby’s international nature in our pages, and this month’s issue is no exception, with two young hams from China on the cover (operating CW in the CQ World Wide!) and an antenna article by two not-quite-so-young hams in India. KØOV writes about international amateur radio direction-finding (ARDF) competitions in his Homing In column. And of course, the CQWW CW contest results include logs from over 165 countries (down from the usual 200 or so due to COVID travel restrictions). To borrow a song title from back in 1985, “we are the world.”

Ham radio gives us an unparalleled opportunity to meet and get to know people from other countries and other cultures on a person-to-person level. We are able to make friends around the world, without regard to politics or differences between governments (even though we are all licensed and regulated by our respective governments), and to see our fellow hams as people just like ourselves, with jobs and families, a shared love of radio and a shared desire to bring people closer together, regardless of our differences. This has been a hallmark of amateur radio since its earliest days, one that we hope continues for as long as there are hams using “magic in the sky” to make DX contacts (as long as the propagation switch is flipped to “on”).

Final Note

It's May, and for the second year in a row, it's a May without Dayton. We will miss seeing so many of you once again, and hope that by 2022, it will once again be safe to travel and be in big crowds. Take care of yourselves, get vaccinated when you can (I've gotten mine) and meanwhile, keep the radio on!