

A 13-Year-Old's Perspective on Amateur Radio and Contesting

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In the three years since I became a radio amateur, the thing I've come to enjoy the most is contesting. A little about myself: I am Calvin, a 13-year-old ham living in Waconia, Minnesota. I was first introduced to this wonderful pastime by my grandpa, K9MMS, when I was 7 years old and living in Illinois. He did Kids Day with me in 2003, and I have loved Amateur Radio ever since. During that event we worked Hawaii, Alaska and Aruba as well as some European and other Caribbean stations. I was amazed. The thing that made it even more fun was that I was talking with other kids. After that I told my grandpa I wanted to get my license so that I could get on the air myself. A couple months later he had me sending and receiving Morse code at 5 WPM on a straight key. He also taught me basic math theory and propagation basics.

I was only 8 by then. Imagine this little kid in this huge chair getting lectured (in a nice way) about propagation and general mathematical formulas that my grandpa thought I should know. I am amazed that I was able to comprehend most of what he was saying. Yes, I got lost a few times, but I always got the basic message. If he hadn't gone into electrical engineering, he would have been a great teacher.

Okay, I knew the code, I knew the formulas for most of the written test, and now all I needed was a book so that I wasn't caught off guard by the question pool when I took the test. Then, things took a different turn.

Ham Radio on Hold

We found out that we were moving to Minnesota. That's not a bad thing in and of itself. It's just that the move totally cut me off from Amateur Radio. Anyway, we made the move. I made new friends and went to a new school; all was well. I lived a normal kid life for the next couple of years.

I got to see my grandpa a couple of times a year, mostly on holidays. Visits lasted a couple of days, and we'd leave again for the eight-hour car ride back to Minnesota. One Thanksgiving when I was 10, however, I surprised him by asking if I could still get my ham radio license. I had gone two years without hearing or seeing ham radio, and I still wanted to get my ticket. I suppose that proves how this hobby can be pure magic.

I got the ARRL's *Now You're Talking!* and found it very easy to understand. I read the book in about two weeks and passed the practice tests every time. In June, I found a local radio club that offered Amateur Radio

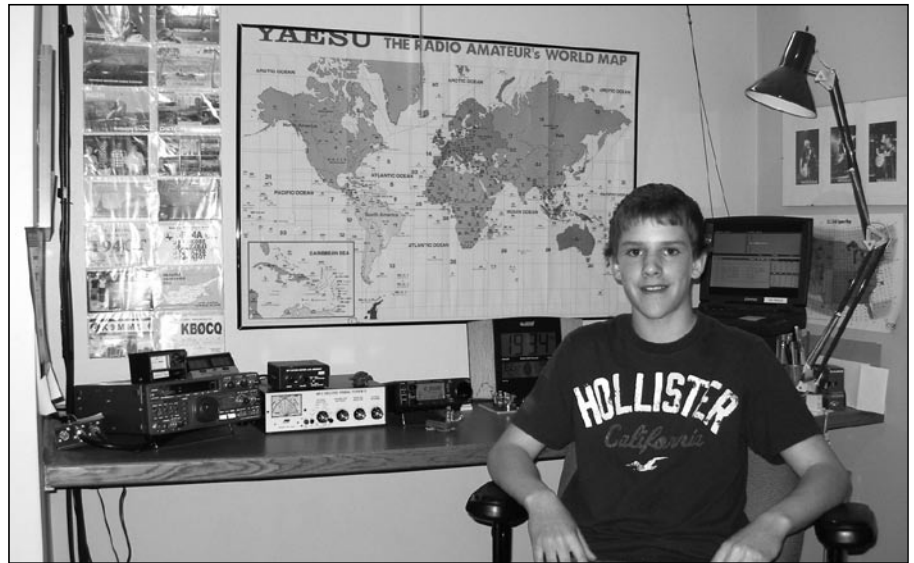


Figure 1 — The future of contesting is in good hands with up-and-coming contesters like Cal, KØDXC.

examinations every month. I passed the Tech exam on my first try. I was thrilled! After two years I'd finally succeeded. My grandpa was also thrilled. I was the only other family member interested in ham radio, and we're still the only licensees in our family.

A few weeks later my grandpa came to Minnesota for Field Day. We didn't spend much time on the air, however. For most of his visit we focused on setting up my station. This included an IC-706MKIIG transceiver and a Butternut HF6V vertical antenna. We also installed a 6 meter dipole, since upgraded to a KB6KQ 6 meter loop, and a ground plane for 2 meters.

On The Air!

When we finally got on the air, we used my grandpa's call sign, K9MMS, since my ticket hadn't yet been issued. Soon after that, however, my call sign appeared, and I became KCØUSZ! My license arrived in the mail the afternoon we were putting up the mast with the loop and ground plane on it, so the timing seemed perfect.

For the first few months as a new licensee, I had a great time operating. I spent most of my time on repeaters, but I had tons of fun on 6 meters too, working about 30 states in 3 openings. A neighbor who lives down the street, Stan, KBØCQ, would always give me a call when the band was open. All of my contacts were on SSB though. I had forgotten Morse code during my time away from hamming.

So there I was, working VHF on a limited schedule, only after school, homework, family and friends. One thing we have to keep in mind: Amateur Radio is only a hobby. More important things in life come first. I soon became extremely bored with repeaters. Six didn't open that much, and it seemed like I was always at school when it *did* open. So I became inactive for seven or eight months.

This would have been a great time to upgrade so I could get on HF, but I didn't want to re-learn the code. I became part of that growing group of hams who had decided not to learn the code just to pass the General. I *could* have learned the code. I'd gotten up to 5 WPM within a month when I lived in Illinois. I had learned the code with my grandpa when I was 7, and it was fun *then*. We'd play games and have make-believe QSOs. The thing was, now that I was an "old man" of 10, I'd lost the desire to learn it. I found it boring to sit and listen to someone sending "A" over and over until it was drilled into my mind.

General at Last

After the FCC's decision to drop Morse code as a licensing requirement, I passed my General after reading just three chapters from *The ARRL General Class License Manual*. Those were the mathematics and formulas chapter, the antennas and antenna theory chapter and some of the propagation chapter. I knew all the rest from past lectures from grandpa, and

I had no problems with the test.

I was very happy. I was 12 and a General class licensee. The first thing I did when I got home was . . . go to bed. That's because I didn't get home until it was nearly 10 PM. There was school the next morning, and, as I said earlier, some things come before ham radio.

The next weekend, however, I spent a lot of time on 20 meter SSB. I had no problem putting my call sign out there. I still remembered Kids Day, and I tried to think of that. I called CQ a little, answered a few stateside CQs and I *listened a lot*. I had a lot of fun. The following day went pretty much the same way — until I heard the pileup. It took me a while to figure out who it was. Some DX stations aren't in the habit of identifying very often, and I am not blessed with a computer and packet.

After a while, the station finally identified. It ended up being in the Dominican Republic. I called and called and called, but even with my "YL" voice, I couldn't seem to get through. Finally though, I did break the pileup. Let me tell you, this thing was huge!

Looking back, I can't believe that a station in the Dominican Republic attracted such a pileup. I exchanged a simple "you're 59, thank you," the guy signed and another wave of callers descended. Since then, I sent a QSL card directly to his manager in Belgium and now have his card on display in my shack. In those days, I would try to send all my DX QSLs direct, even if it were a common country. Since then I've learned to use the bureau.

Getting my General rejuvenated my interest in ham radio, and I would try to get on HF during weekends as time permitted. After a few weeks, though, I began losing interest again. From a DXing standpoint, things got boring. I could work most of the states I heard, but with my vertical and 100 W I was at the mercy of the "big guns" with their beams and four-squares. I believe the only reason I broke the pileups at all was because I used good operating skills. Some people buy amplifiers and get their towers up, then think they'll work all the DX, no matter what. But some folks fail to consider the role that operating skill plays, and I worked this to my advantage, despite my modest setup.

Hooked on CW

In due time, however, I grew tired of having to put so much time into breaking pileups for common countries. Instead of going inactive again, I remembered the thrill of CW — and got mad at myself for not wanting to re-learn the code.

I dug out a piece of paper on which I'd written all the code characters then tuned down into the CW portion of 20 meters for the first time. I was amazed at how much activity I heard — far more than what I was used to hearing on SSB. I worked up my courage and called CQ, probably at

less than 5 WPM. Sure enough, I got an answer right away. It seems there's always someone out there who would love to help you out — in this case to help me improve my code skills. By the time I signed I was again hooked on CW.

The microphone soon found itself stored in a box in my closet. I was having way too much fun on CW to even think about spending hours yakking away just to log a station in Italy. I finally did take the mic out for my first phone contest, however. I did a solo effort during the 2007 IARU World HF Championship. Through the whole contest I only made 73 Qs. My rate was so bad that I won't even mention it, considering this is a contest magazine. Upon reflection, though, I suppose it wasn't too bad for my first contest. After that I put the microphone away again for a while. My voice had grown hoarse from all the time I'd spent calling CQ in the IARU.

Thanksgiving provided my first opportunity to operate from my grandpa's station using my own call sign, by then KØDXC. We entered the CQ WW DX CW in the multi-two category. The only problem was that we couldn't spend much time on the radio because it was over a holiday weekend. All told, we ended up making about 200 Qs in the CQ WW, and I worked about 30 new DXCC entities. (I also worked a few new ones before the contest, as the DX ops were very active checking out their setups. I was very happy with the results of this contest and my "expedition" to Illinois.

Not long afterward my CW speed really jumped. The 35 WPM contest exchange made something in my brain snap, and this made it easy to improve on my Morse code ability. At home I could easily copy *most* of a conversation at 20 WPM, and I was happy to have accomplished something I never really thought I'd do at this age.

I kept operating CW and improving my speed and accuracy. I find CW DXing a thrill. So many common DX stations call CQ without getting an answer (unlike phone), and they are mine for the calling. My DXCC count jumped, and by the time you read this I expect to have nearly worked the 100 I need for the certificate. Not only that, but CW pileups are a lot of fun. Dits and dahs have come to be music to my ears.

The Contest Rush

Then I decided to try contesting again. My last effort had been in the IARU, and I hadn't done very well. The January NAQP was coming up, and I decided to enter. It would be my first ever CW contest as a single operator. My grandpa also was participating, and it was he who reminded me when the contest was so I didn't miss it.

Time can fly when you're having fun, and before long it was 1200 UTC and the test was under way. *CQ CQ NA KØDXC KØDXC*. Next thing I knew I had a run going on 20 meters. It lasted for an hour and a half, and I ended up making 85 Qs

in that period of time — a rate of just over one Q a minute. My grandpa got a late start, and I was ahead of him for the first half of the contest. In the end I ended up with 278 Qs and 103 multipliers for 28,634 points, not too bad for my first solo CW contest outing.

Since then I have operated every contest I have time for (school and sports take up most of my time). I have had a ton of fun and am still operating mostly CW, having given up on phone events after the IARU outside of a dozen or so QSOs in the NAQP phone event. My copy speed has really improved, and I now can handle 30 WPM. CW is great, and without it this hobby wouldn't be nearly as fun.

If we have worked already, thanks for the QSO. There are many great hams out there whom I've had the privilege of meeting. I would also like to thank my Elmers. Gary, K9MMS, Carl, WBØCFF, Keith, WØS, and Stan, KBØCQ. All have helped me so much.

There's talk that not enough young people are coming into Amateur Radio and that not enough youth are getting interested in CW, and how it's going to "fade away."

That won't happen while I'm around.

73, Cal, KØDXC

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