

NCJ Profiles: John Crovelli, W2GD

CQ Contest Hall of Fame member John Crovelli, W2GD, has achieved first-place world scores in the CQ World Wide DX phone and CW, the ARRL International DX phone and CW, the IARU HF World Championship CW and the CQ WPX CW. He holds multiple current CQ WW Low Power and QRP world records, and has numerous winning ARRL Field Day and CQ 160 Meter Contest multioperator scores to his credit. John has been a member of four World Radiosport Team Championship (WRTC) teams over the last 15 years. How did he become such an outstanding contesteer, and how did he bounce back from a near-fatal tower accident in 2008? Here is John's fascinating Amateur Radio story.

Amateur Radio has played a dominant role in my life for more than 50 years, and contesting has always been the major attraction. I've met thousands of similarly addicted competitors and have enjoyed the benefits of many enduring friendships. I grew up in the small rural Northern New Jersey town of Liberty Corner, which in the late 1950s was still outside the fringe of the New York City megalopolis. At age nine, while listening to 40 meters on a vintage 1930s Philco table radio that I'd won at auction for 50 cents, I heard conversations between stations with W and K call signs. I wasn't sure what was happening or even whom to ask about it at the time.

As was the case with so many hams of my generation, my introduction to Amateur Radio was via a TV repairman, in my case Irb Richardt, W2VJZ, a neighbor, who showed me both his mobile and home rigs and took me along to ARRL Field Day in 1960. His father, John, W2GZJ, my Elmer, was blind, and I found his ability to build equipment from scratch an inspiration. After I passed my Novice exam the following June, Irb took me out to "operate," even though my license hadn't yet arrived. Every one of the 34 contacts I made during Field Day 1961 was a total thrill.

My first station was a Heathkit DX-20 transmitter and Knight Kit Span Master two-tube regenerative receiver, built from kits. Dad and I hung a random wire between the barn and a pushup mast. My code speed quickly improved, and I was working stations all the way out to Wisconsin! Years later, looking through my Novice logs, I realized I'd randomly worked many contesting greats of the time, such



Figure 1 — W2GD and K4ZA install a 40 meter OWA at 185 feet at the NR5M super station.



Figure 2 — W2GD prepares a C-49XR at VP5JM.

as W9IOP, W4KFC, W3GM and others who were prowling the Novice bands in those days.

At the FCC Field Office in New York City that winter I met Ed Glibert, WV2SRQ (now K2SQ), beginning a 50-year friendship. As did so many of my peers, I gravitated to the CW traffic nets to hone my skills, got an ARRL Official Relay Station appointment,

and dove into the ARRL Communications Department (CD) parties, ARRL November Sweepstakes and other domestic contests.

Through high school, I kept at traffic-handling, operated as many contests as I could (Sweepstakes and the CD parties were favorites) and earned money for radio equipment by cutting lawns and delivering newspapers. One local, W2ZKE, took me to meetings of the Morris Radio Club and on 10 meter transmitter hunts. There was a WA2SRQ/WA2UOO class 2B Field Day each June, and I started hanging out with other young East Coast contesters almost every night on 3830.

My non-radio interests included music and Boy Scouts. I played the tuba and sousaphone in the high school concert and marching bands and enjoyed summer camping trips to the Adirondack Mountains in Upstate New York.

In 1967 I headed to Washington, DC to attend The American University, where I earned a BS in business administration (computer systems) in 1971. I met Chet, WA4KJR (later KP4EAJ and now N4FX), who was the MARS operator at the US Coast Guard's K4CG. He invited me to operate with the K4CG multi-multi team,

my first real exposure to DX contesting. I operated several CQ World Wide and ARRL events there, rubbing elbows with PVRcers K3WUW (later W3PP, SK), WB4FDT, W4YE, K4PQL (now N4AF), N4HY, K6LZO (now K6ZO) and others. Future ARRL President Vic Clarke, W4KFC (SK), was the Alexandria Coast Guard site executive at the time. Meeting Vic back then was like shaking hands with a god.

In 1971, the economy was going through a rough patch, and I ended up doing house construction for a year, before beginning a 35-year career in business management and consulting. I kept busy in the 1970s serving a term as ARRL Northern New Jersey Section Communications Manager, helping found the Wireless Institute of the Northeast contest club, going to Dayton Hamvention® for the first time in 1975, buying my first house and putting up my first tower the next year. To overcome objections to my tower I “volunteered” to be the township’s Office of Emergency Management director, a position I held for the next 20 years. I joined the Frankford Radio Club in 1976 and currently serve as vice president.

1978 was a watershed year. I became a father (Domenick, later KB2JAL, was born in July), won the ARRL SS CW SOHP title (the first operator on the East Coast to win in decades, and only the second to do it from a home station in nearly 35 years — joining WA5LES/K5RC for that honor), and in November went on my first DXpedition as the 20 meter operator at 9Y4W in CQ WW CW (third-place world finish).

I’ve always had a special love for Field Day and served as chairman of the Cherryville Repeater Association’s FD efforts for 25 years, putting together teams that set many new FD entry class records. I’ve served as a member of the Hunterdon County OEM communications group for more than 30 years.

Management consulting assignments occasionally sent me to Europe. I operated two ARRL DX contests from 4U1ITU in 1983 and 1984 and won the Europe CW SOAB HP title in 1984 by edging out Paulo, I2UIY (SK).

I served as *NCJ* editor from 1981 until 1982 in the pre-ARRL era, taking over for K5RC. After passing the baton to K7GM, I continued as an *NCJ* contributing editor, writing the “Operator Profile” columns for a decade as well as many feature articles.

In 1984 I built a new home on three acres, one mile from my old place, and I assembled a competitive three-tower station. I began operating selected contests (WPX, SS) running QRP and became serious about the major DX contests. A Kenwood TS-930S would be my radio of choice for the next two decades.



Figure 3 — K7JA, KØDQ and W2GD at Visalia 2009

When Domenick reached traveling age, offshore vacations and contest operations in the Caribbean became fun annual events. Early trips included a PJ7A M/S in 1984 with K3VW (SK) and VP2MGD ARRL DX SOHP in 1985 — my first worldwide win in a DX contest. Contesting from Aruba began in the fall of 1986 and continues today (the total number of trips to Aruba is now 85 and counting). In December 1987, after my second ARRL DX CW victory, this time as P4ØGD, OH2BH invited me to be the first North American to operate from Market Reef (OJØ) in the 1988 CQ 160 Meter CW contest, an adventure I just couldn’t resist. Later in 1988, I operated 10 meters and 160 meters with the PJ1B M/M team, helping to set a CQ WW CW world record that would go unchallenged for more than a decade.

I posted my first CQ WW CW SOAB HP world high score in 1989 as P4ØGD using a small tribander and wires at 40 feet. For me this was my ultimate operating thrill, and, given the limited hardware, one of the most gratifying.

During the 90s I’d found my contesting home on Aruba and would visit two or three times a year. Gary, P43GR, a missionary from Texas, hosted these visits, and our families shared Thanksgiving Day celebrations many times. Eventually a second tower and monobanders were added to Gary’s station. I had a total surprise world CQ WW phone win in 1993. I’ve never been terribly enthusiastic about phone operating, but when the rate is high, the enjoyment level soars.

In the summer of 1990, my family and I attended the first World Radiosport Team Championship in Seattle. I’d missed the deadline for applying to be a competitor, so I went as the official correspondent for *QST*. My significant other, Elaine, KB2ERI, has been my life companion since the mid-90s, and we’ve attended every WRTC together since 1996 in San Francisco. She teaches English as a Second Language at the elementary school level and remains totally supportive of my contesting pursuits.

By 1994, with construction of his new church on Aruba nearing completion, P43GR was planning his return to the States. That May I entered the WPX CW and set a SOAB HP record that would stand until D4B came along a decade later. Gary introduced me to the new church minister, a non-ham and native Aruban, who agreed to host future P4ØW operations. The new station built in Santa Cruz was shared with K4UEE/P4ØR for a number of years.

In the 1990s I fed my passion for 160 meters with multi-ops from my home against local competitors such as WW2Y. Then we found a new site at the Coast Guard base on Sandy Hook, New Jersey, where we were competitive for 10 years. The events of 9/11 closed that site to us, and we then moved to our current location farther south on the New Jersey coast near Atlantic City. Saltwater locations rock on Top Band.

CT1BOH helped me erect my first tower at the new P4ØW station in 1994. A second CQ WW CW SOAB HP win came my way in 1996, and my first ARRL DX phone and

IARU CW victories followed in 1997. The sunspots were rising, as were scores, but there were signs that serious competition from Northern Africa lay ahead.

In April 1999 I received what I feel is the ultimate honor in contesting, induction into the CQ Contest Hall of Fame. This recognition by my peers was a humbling event for which I remain very proud and grateful. George, WØUA, my teammate at WRTC-1996, said many kind words on my behalf at the induction ceremony.

With the sunspot cycle nearing its peak in the late 1990s I decided to try QRP entries in CQ WW. Armed with an 80 meter wire beam design by WXØB, new QRP world records were set on CW in 1999 and on phone in 2000. I still recall the thrill of a 173/hour rate on 3573 kHz the second night of the CW event, running Europe with just 5W. I find QRP operating exceptionally exciting and plan to do more.

While in Slovenia for WRTC-2000, I met A61AJ. Later that year I joined an all-star international CW team in Dubai that worked tirelessly the week before the CQ WW to prepare the station. Our 16,222 QSO, 42 Meg score was a new Asia M/M record, and the trip, nearly half way around the world for me, was a cultural experience I'll never forget.

The past dozen years I've made about 40 more trips to P4ØW for CQ WW, IARU, WPX, ARRL DX, and TBDC events and achieved victories in all the majors except WPX phone (maybe someday I'll join my friends KØDQ and W2SC, who have won them all). I'm particularly proud to operate an offshore station that I designed, built and maintain alone, which made possible my setting the all-time clock hour rate records for HP (247) and QRP (223) entries in CQ WW CW. Rate wins contests, and it is the ultimate contest rush.

Amid this I served several years as the Hudson Division representative on the ARRL Contest Advisory Committee before moving to Eastern Pennsylvania five years ago. The only antenna at my current home is an 80 meter halfwave 70 feet in the trees. I annually excite it during SS CW weekend for an hour or two. Over the past decade of being stationless, N2NT, NO2R (now XU7ACY), WE3C, K2TW, W2CG, W3BGN, NR5M and K9RS/3 have been wonderful hosts for my contesting urges.

In 2003 I left business management work behind and started an antenna and tower service that caters solely to the needs of radio amateurs. I've been blessed with the opportunity to design, build and maintain stations for many of my contesting peers and more "normal" hams too. I've done projects on three continents and in 30 states. I've found it's a win-win proposition nearly every day for my clients and me.



Figure 4 — W2GD operate a late-evening shift on 30 meter CW during the K5D Desecheo DXpedition.

Don Daso, K4ZA, and I have collaborated on several larger projects, including the NR5M M/M rebuild and more recently the multi-tower K9CT installation. The work is exceptionally rewarding, and making dreams become reality for many of my clients is very gratifying.

In June 2008, while installing a tower in Maine, I suffered life-threatening injuries riding 30 feet of Rohn 45G tower to the ground. I broke my back in three places, had six pelvic fractures, and suffered assorted internal injuries. Within hours, the contesting community graced me with an overwhelming outpouring of concern, support and encouragement when I needed it most. Well-wishing phone calls came in from every continent, and hundreds of e-mails and cards from contesters and other hams in more than 100 countries helped raise my spirits during the subsequent three months of treatment and recuperation. Hospital visits by K1DG, K1RX, K1SA, W2SC, and K8PO were particularly supportive during some difficult times. K3LR and W9ZRZ made possible a Field Day operation from my hospital bed (remote control of the K3LR super station on 40 meters via the Internet), keeping alive my 48 continuous years of FD participation. I remain humbled by everyone's expression of concern and love during those early dark days. Fortunately, I've recovered completely from my injuries without long-term complications and returned to tower work just 90 days later. Thanks so much, everyone. You made a *real* difference in

my life, and I remain forever grateful and in your debt.

I've been pondering what lies ahead during the next 50 years of contesting. My competitive spirit remains strong, but perhaps my best SOAB contesting is behind me, although I'd like to believe that a recent top five world score in the CQ WW phone from P4ØW is indicative of what's still ahead. I enjoyed being a member of the 2009 K5D DXpedition to Desecheo and hope opportunities to activate other rare ones will come my way. My son Domenick and his wife Mei had twin girls in November, so I expect being a new grandpa will consume more of my free time. And perhaps Elaine and I will retire to Central Pennsylvania in the next few years, and I'll build a third competitive home station on a hilltop. I'd like to do more LP, QRP and multiop contesting and keep P4ØW and the Southern New Jersey 160 meter station competitive a while longer. Of course WRTC-2014 is just ahead. I'll definitely be there and hope to see many of you in New England too.

Thanks, John, for sharing your story. It's always fascinating to learn the background of successful operators and operations. I'm sure you've inspired many readers to become better contesters. Your story is also a reminder that Amateur Radio is as much about fellowship as it is about operating achievements. We are grateful for all you've done for our hobby. We'll look for you in the pileups!

NCJ