

## Tennessee QSO Party 2016 — A Learning Opportunity

*“Sometimes a contest is more than a contest.”*

Contesting can be somewhat xenophobic. I often look back at my early days in ham radio and wish that I had been exposed to contesting sooner. Once I was introduced to contesting, it felt as though I'd found something that I had long been seeking. My opinion is that if more people actually could see and understand what we're up to, there would be a lot more interest in our little game. It's difficult to explain the appeal of ham radio contesting to anyone without directly exposing them to it. The 2016 Tennessee QSO Party was an opportunity to share our joy of contesting with folks who have not had the opportunity to experience it yet.

The Tennessee QSO Party (TnQP) has a history going back to the 1960s under the management of W4OGG (SK). The event went dormant for several years, but Doug Smith, W9WI, revived the contest in 1996, and it has been going strong ever since. One new feature that Doug introduced was a “bonus station,” which is worth 100 points per QSO. The bonus station is a multioperator effort using the call sign K4TCG. The location has usually been from a station capable of multi-transmitter operation. K4TCG operations have occurred throughout the state, ranging from fairly serious competitive efforts to more loosely organized events focused on training new operators. This year, we aimed for a mixture of both. While still aiming for a maximum score, we also hosted an open house. Our goal was to allow those curious about contesting to see and perhaps even experience it for themselves. Announcements were made at area hamfests and on local VHF repeaters. We made a real effort to get the word out to anyone who might be curious about



Jeff, NY4N, running, while dispatcher Shauna (now awaiting her call sign) copies each call sign on a check sheet. [Brad Brooks, WF7T, photo]

contest-style operating.

The TnQP falls on the same weekend as the fairly new CW Open contests, sponsored by the CWOps organization. I operated all three CW Open events, which left limited time to change the station configuration from single operator to multioperator, multi transmitter. I stayed up late after the last CW Open, getting the room ready to set up two additional operating positions. WF7T and K4UU arrived Sunday morning with additional radios and amplifiers, and we got busy assembling the operating positions. Within a few hours, we had three HF stations plus VHF ready to go. Available antennas were distributed to provide maximum flexibility. It turned out that conditions rarely supported three simultaneous open bands, but we did have some periods where all three HF stations were staying busy. In the end, we

wound up making just over 1,000 contacts.

### A Learning Environment

The real story from the weekend was that we had an opportunity to demonstrate multioperator contesting in a fairly intimate environment. This was different than your average Field Day operation, with dozens of people milling around and lots of distractions. We worked to create an environment where questions were encouraged. We took time to explain some of the nuances of contest station design and operating technique. A few folks were new to ham radio, and this marked their first exposure to any kind of HF operation. Among those attending were a sheriff's office dispatcher and his apprentice, operating as a team. We had the local ARES Emergency Coordinator, a few VHF-only types, plus our core team of seasoned contest operators. There were lots of intelligent questions asked, and a few laughs were had as well.

My dear Susie prepared all kinds of tasty treats for our guests, and she worked all day to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable.

### A Successful Operation

Feedback was positive, and we accomplished several things. First, I think we put a good face on contesters and contesting in general. No one was “talked down to” or made to feel that their questions were silly. Everyone seemed to have a good time, and I have since received a few follow-up questions about upcoming contests. I think that we will try to do this again in the future. TCG would encourage others to share their hobby, especially with the uninitiated. Consider opening up your station during a QSO party or other “low-stress” contest as a means of introducing new folks to the interesting challenges and joys of radio competition.