

NCJ Profiles: Rich Smith, N6KT

NCJ last profiled Rich in March 1994. As an SSB specialist, Rich — aka “Mr Fast” — has redefined what it means to be an effective phone contester. Once in 1988 he had a 367 QSO hour on 20 meter SSB, and he broke the 10,000 QSO mark in the 1993 ARRL International DX Contest. Relying on strategy, stamina and continuous skill improvement, Rich has developed his own set of “success factors” to keep him in the game. Here is Rich’s personal Amateur Radio story.

My interest in radio started about age 14. *Popular Electronics* had articles on building all kinds of gadgets, including some small transmitters. I was intrigued by the idea of transmitting a signal hundreds or thousands of miles. Since you needed a license to transmit, I began to investigate getting one.

Luckily, my Elmer (WB6VFW) lived just across the street. He loaned me a receiver to listen on the air and practice the code. A Novice license soon followed. My first antennas at WN6MQS were dipoles for 80 and 40. After upgrading to Advanced class, I heard and joined in during the 1975 ARRL November Sweepstakes. The excitement and enthusiasm of Sweepstakes sparked my interest in contesting. I borrowed a station on a small hilltop in the Bay Area for the 1976 ARRL International DX Contest and got hooked on DX contesting. Before this, it had not occurred to me that a California station could call “CQ contest” and have DX stations answer.

Decisions, Decisions

At the time I had to decide if I could operate in both phone and CW contests while keeping up with school and other activities. I decided to concentrate on SSB events, since the average rates are higher and all of the different accents on phone pose a challenge.

George, K6SV (SK), invited me to join the NCCC in 1976. This was one of the best decisions I could have made. There was a wealth of knowledge and energy in the NCCC. Some of the best operators, technologists and station builders are members of the NCCC.

After I displayed a strong desire to learn contesting, I got invitations to help out at multi-single and multi-multi operations at W6OKK, AI6V, and N6RO. I was on a steep learning curve, and these operations gave me the opportunity to watch some great operators in action. There was much to

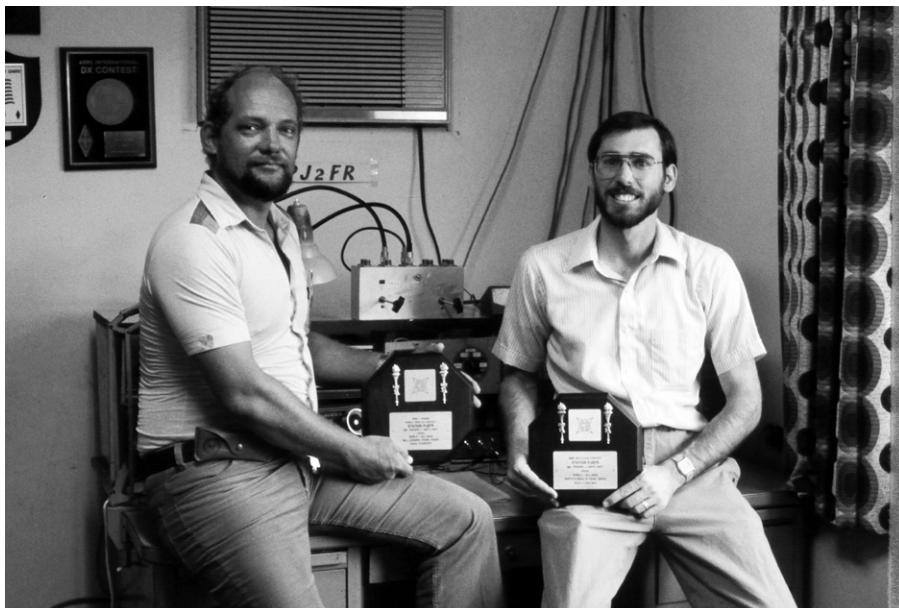


Figure 1 — PJ2FR in 1985: Alfred van der Vlies, PJ2FR (left), and Rich, N6KT. The plaques are for the world record 1983 CQ WPX SSB operation. [N6KT photo]

absorb while watching other operators run pileups. Calling in DX pileups showed me the best techniques to use, if I were to run a pileup some day at a DX location.

DX Sounds its Siren Song

In 1977, the call of DX took WA6VEF (now VA7RR) and me to Canada to operate the IARU HF World Championship from VE7WJ. It was my first chance to operate from a big station in a DX location. On our third try, in 1979, we took world first place! In 1980, we tried the IARU again, this time from KH6XX in Hawaii, earning first place and setting a world record!

The CQ World Wide DX Contest is a favorite of mine, and I thought it was time to give it a try from a DX location. In 1981 it was N6KT/HKØ from San Andres. In 1982 I operated multi-single from 4T4O in Peru. Each effort pushed me to learn and try to improve my skills. Along with the wonderful experience of radio contesting came the reward of new friendships and the chance to experience other countries and cultures. It was a great opportunity to see the world with local hams as guides.

My next big break was meeting Freddy, PJ2FR, and operating his station from 1983 through 1988. Some world high scores and world records resulted from his nice tribander and 2 element 40 meter

station. All the while, I was working to improve his station and my operating skills. Should we feed his 80 meter delta loop for vertical or horizontal polarization? How could I boost my rates even further? How do we get a little more out of the antenna system?

During this time, I met and married a wonderful lady named Rebecca. She understood my need to travel for contesting and supported my efforts. We made an agreement: I could travel for up to two contests a year in exchange for *no* radio activity at home for the rest of the year. This worked out very well, and between trips I concentrated on trying to be a good dad to our three heterodynes.

Rebecca and I co-wrote an article for *CQ Contest* that appeared in January 1999. As Rebecca said, “Go into any bookstore, and you’ll find many books on how to keep your marriage happy or alive. The ‘Ann Landers’ or ‘Dear Abby’ newspaper columns also quite often offer solutions to shaky marriages or romances. I’ve got a better solution! Just marry a ham radio contester!”

The Galapagos

In 1990, I had the good fortune to meet Guido, HC8GR, and Chelita, HC8FR (SK). This was the beginning of a long

term relationship that spanned 20 years, including world records in all three major DX contests. Guido and Chelita were internationally minded hams who really enjoyed hosting visitors from other countries. The station at El Junco could

not have existed without their support.

The HC8A/HC8N/HC8L station at El Junco was on a very quiet hilltop location. In my involvement with Dave, W6NL, and Trey, N5KO, I learned how to design and build a world-class contest station. Being

part of the Galapagos team was another one of the best decisions of my life. Besides the great friendship, there was so much to learn: antenna designs and heights, SO2R technicalities and logistics, operating strategies and skills, computer logging, shack design and more.

Antennas, strategy, and skills as well as the technology involved in contesting have always intrigued me. For many years, antennas were my major concern. In the past, I could be found on a tower playing with antennas until an hour before the start of a contest. After learning much from this experience, I have a more balanced approach, spending more time working to improve efficiency in the shack.

I mostly logged by hand through 2002. I'd been encouraged to use computer logging, but I was somewhat reluctant. Besides, if you are winning contests, there is less motivation to change. I certainly appreciate the benefits of computer logging these days.

My contesting came to an abrupt halt in 2002, when my darling wife Rebecca suffered a recurrence of cancer. I needed to take a few years off from contesting to take care of her and, following her passing, our three children. It was a heartbreaking time for us.

Getting Back into the Game

Returning to contesting in 2007, I finally got serious about computer logging and SO2R. I had lost the SOAB HP world records for CQ WW and CQ WPX and knew I needed to "up my game" to have any chance at winning them back. With a lot of help from Dave, W6NL, I began getting competent at SO2R.

I enjoy the challenge of SOAB HP. It offers the highest consistent rates. It is very competitive and gives great satisfaction if one can win this category. My favorite contest, the CQ WW, has a short exchange, has both country and zone multipliers, counts multipliers per band, and has the highest participation of any of the contests.

I'm deeply grateful to those who helped me along the way. Some major influences over my years of contesting have been VA7RR, AI6V, N6RO, W6NL, N5KO, K3EST, and N6BT. The hundreds of hours spent working together and discussing contesting in all its facets have been very rewarding, both personally and in my contesting knowledge. Even though I'm a fairly seasoned contester, I like to attend club meetings and conventions, to pick up new ideas and strategies. I am always trying to learn something that I can apply to contesting.



Figure 2 — Rich at HC8A in 2008 [N6KT photo]



The 5D5A CQ WPX SSB 2011 team: (L-R) Stefano, IK2QEI; Rich, N6KT, and Matteo, IK2SGC [N6KT photo]

Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes

Contesting has certainly evolved since I started in the 1970s. Things such as computer logging, SO2R, larger and larger antennas, digital voice keyers and spotting nets have changed the game quite a bit. In the 1980s, you could make a winning score from a DX station with a good tribander, a 2 element “shorty-forty” and wires for 80 and 160. Six thousand contacts could win the CQ WW SSB for SOAB HP. More recently, the escalation in antennas, transceivers, and operating skills has prompted winning stations to install monobanders on 40 through 10, a gain antenna on 80, and a very efficient antenna on 160. Winning scores are often in the 9000 QSO range, with significantly higher multiplier totals.

The rise in Europe’s ham population has changed contesting to a large degree. Operators need to spend more time working Europe. Some stations have antenna systems dedicated to working Europe.

Success Factors

I’ve learned some concepts that might be called “success factors” during my decades of serious contesting. Nothing here is really new, but these seem most important to me.

1. You’ve gotta love what you’re doing.

The challenge of contesting, and the magic of radio propagation are still a thrill to me.

2. **Can’t get there alone.** The friendship, sharing of ideas, energy, and time together is a huge part of the success of contesting.

3. **Never give up.** Setbacks and unusual difficulties, such as temporary power losses and poor conditions, should not cause a serious tester to give up. Working through adversities can be instructive.

4. **Keep learning.** It is said that we learn more from our losses than from our victories. After a contest effort, I spend a few hours over the next few days writing down lessons learned and things I would like to do differently in the future.

5. **Practice, practice, practice.** Skills become second nature when practiced a lot.

6. **Ask questions. Contesters will share.** Even though testers are very competitive, they are willing to share their secrets and ideas. Contesting is a wonderful fraternity.

7. **Non-testers make up most of your score.** Don’t get angry at innocent mistakes. Contacts with casual testers and non-testers make up a large part of our scores. They may forget to use phonetics, might say “please copy...” or repeat things too often. Give them a break.

8. **Complacency is death.** I have

learned this the hard way. Reluctance to switch to computer logging, ignoring station internal design and sticking with old operating habits have resulted in my slipping a bit behind the competition.

Mind Games

Funny things can happen when a person is awake for many hours. For me, hallucinations are part of every serious contest effort. My first experience with hallucinations was in 1977 at VE7WJ when I started “seeing” smoke in the operating room. I called out to the other operators, who were sleeping at the time. Between CQs, I asked them to check and see what was generating smoke. Was something burning? It turned out that it was all in my mind. Since then, I have experienced the same hallucination many times but have learned to trust my nose more than my eyes.

Late in a contest, I often sense movement out of the corner of my eye, but when I turn to look, no one is there. During one operation in HC8 during my hand logging days, it looked to me for an entire day that I was writing on clay rather than on paper. I knew it was not true, but the hallucination persisted.

Looking Ahead

In my view, contesting is a huge benefit to Amateur Radio. It promotes international

goodwill and presents a constant challenge to those involved. Many improvements in antennas, gear, and operating skills have come out of the competitive desire to improve. The Amateur Radio spectrum is certainly in full use during contests. Operating skills are practiced and improved — a great benefit for disaster communication.

What does the future hold? I have been fortunate to have held world records in several contests in the SOAB HP category. These are ARRL International DX SSB, 1988 to present; CQ WPX SSB, 1983-84, 1986-88, 1992-2002; CQ WW SSB, 1992-98.

Looking ahead, I would like to keep improving my skills, continue traveling for contests, making new friends, and maybe winning the CQ WW SSB one more time.

For quite a few hams contesting is their primary focus. In my opinion, it is one of the great attractions to Amateur Radio.

Thanks, Rich, for sharing your ham radio contesting story as well as your personal success factors. It’s always fascinating to learn how successful operators get their start in radiosport and find ways to keep their skills sharp over their years of competition.