

NCJ Interviews: Fred Laun, K3ZO

Our *NCJ* interview subject is Fred Laun, K3ZO. Fred stands tall among contesting's greats — literally. His nearly 6 foot, 3 inch presence is hard to miss at any gathering. His well-equipped station in Maryland still boasts a towering signal too. Fred's ham radio career has taken him all over the globe, and his call signs have included W9SZR, HI8XAL, HS3AL, HS5ABD, XV5AC, LU5HFI, HSØZAR, and doubtless others. He was inducted into the CQ Contest Hall of Fame in 1993.

NCJ: I have always been a big fan of yours; you are one of my contesting heroes. I cut my teeth in the 1970s, when you were all over the globe. We span slightly different generations, but I thought it would be nice for our *NCJ* readers to get a little feel for how things were different when you got started in contesting. You were a part of the W9YT gang at the University of Wisconsin. That was certainly a different era, when university clubs played a larger role. What is the same, and what was different than it is today?

K3ZO: Before I was at W9YT, I had my own station, but it was a Viking II and a dipole. So, W9YT was a big jump up for me in terms of having a fancy station at my beck and call. Unfortunately, I enjoyed it too much, and I flunked out of college three times, because I'd majored in W9YT essentially for the first few years of my college career. But, it's good to have failure early in life, because nothing that comes along afterwards is quite so bad.

But, yes, things were different. We didn't have all the aids we do now, with the Internet. And I've been an old-fashioned type. I haven't adapted to all of the new things. I don't like to hook my computer to the radio, even though I can do it. Basically I learned on my own — to search and pounce on my own without any aids from outside. I still enjoy doing that. I still find that more challenging and more fun. I am more of a hunter than a gatherer, I guess you could say.

NCJ: When you were getting started in radio, did you have the feeling that you were part of a whole cohort of people your age, with similar backgrounds? Was it a shared experience as you went down the road of ham radio to CW and to CW contesting?

K3ZO: Well, it was amazing. The only way you could get out of taking the exam

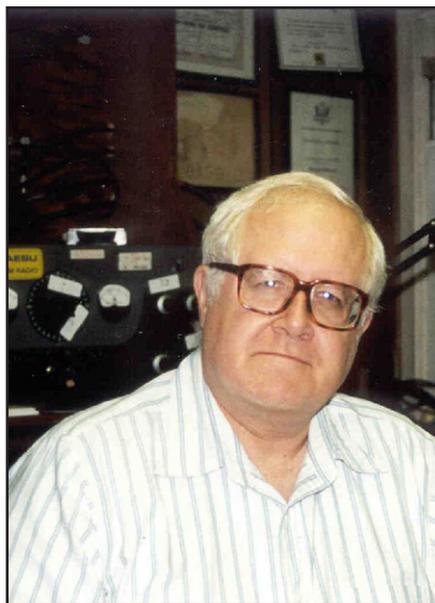


Figure 1 — K3ZO in his Maryland shack (2001 photo).

— the Novice exam — at an FCC office was if you lived more than 150 miles away from a quarterly examination point, and Milwaukee was a quarterly exam point. I went to Chicago for my Christmas vacation, having just turned 14, with my father, who had a business meeting in Chicago. We went down on the train together. He didn't know anything about radio, but he was asking me all the questions from the license manual on the way down. So, I sort of memorized them. And when I walked into the exam room in Chicago, you would have thought it was a meeting of a middle school, because in those days there were hundreds of young hams. We didn't have the Internet. If you wanted to get near science as a kid, ham radio was just about the best way to do it. And that's what attracted a lot of us to ham radio. Probably I was about the average age of all the guys taking the Novice exam, of which there were 150 or 200.

NCJ: Wow!

K3ZO: I was 14, and there were people 10 years old and 18 years old. The 14-year-olds were the peak of the distribution curve. So, it was all a bunch of kids there.

So, I got started on the Novice band. My first contest was Field Day. I was at a boarding school, Wayland Academy in

Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. I joined the local club — Rock River Radio Club, W9TCH — and my first contest was Field Day. I was the logger on 80 meters CW. I couldn't transmit, because I was a Novice [WN-9SZR] at the time, and they were operating outside of the Novice bands, but I could log. I was the logger for W9LGR who was the 17-year-old wife of W9ADM. First of all I was amazed that there was a 17-year-old girl who was already married, *and* a ham! Then I noticed that I could hear things that she couldn't. So, I would write stuff down on a pad, and she would work the station I wrote down, and then I wrote down the exchange. That's the way I got started in contesting. Once I had had that Field Day experience, I was hooked.

NCJ: Interesting. Speaking of contesting, what were the steps you took, who were the people you styled yourself after, and who were the people who had an influence on you?

K3ZO: Well, there was Reno Goetsch, W9RQM, who later became W9NA. He won Sweepstakes for the Wisconsin Section year after year. He didn't have a real fancy station. He was certainly one of the people I modeled myself after. I went up to visit him just as soon as it was legal for me to drive. On the Sweepstakes side, Reno would have been my hero. And then on the DX contest side, once I went to the University of Wisconsin, we didn't have W9YT right away. At the beginning we had a dorm radio club with the call W9GOC. In those days kids didn't have TVs in their rooms and, of course, no hand-held devices either. They had an AM/FM radios that were wide open to poor image rejection. So, W9GOC was getting into every student's radio, and we were tired of students coming screaming at us for being on the air. Seven of us finally formed a club at the university's engineering building, which meant that we were far enough away from the dorms that we wouldn't bother anybody. That was W9YT. We got an old call sign that the university once had in the 1930s.

There was a group of DXers in Madison, Wisconsin, and the big contesteer among them was Art Saboe, W9LNM, later W9ZM. As far as DX contesting went, I modeled myself after Art.

NCJ: And speaking of DX contests, they certainly were different in those days, with the quota and with single sideband not

being in such universal use as it is today.

K3ZO: Well, it was interesting. CW had a quota, but on sideband — I should say “phone,” because most of it was AM — there was no quota, because you couldn’t work six G stations on AM, even from the Midwest, even if you were lucky. On CW, though, you were limited to working six stations per band per country. This was apparently done to give some people in Europe a chance to have a few people call *them*. The other thing — and it was even in the *ARRL Operating Manual* — was that you were *not* supposed to call CQ. You were only supposed to do S&P in a DX contest. It was unheard of for anyone to call CQ. You just spent the whole contest doing S&P. And when you had worked six Brits on 20 in the ARRL International DX Contest you had to ignore all future Brits you might run across on 20.

Another one of my mentors, later on, when I had been at W9YT for a couple of years, was W9EWC, who was the big phone contester from Wisconsin. He didn’t have the exact Telrex Christmas Tree, but he had the Telrex antennas, or most of them, all on a windmill tower. We’d sit and listen to him at W9YT, which was 125 miles southwest of him, and we’d hear that monstrous backscatter signal of his on 15 meters, with his 8 element Telrex, taking out about 20 kHz of the band with his monstrous backscatter signal. He said that every once in a while guys would be calling him. It wasn’t customary to answer DX callers. You were just supposed to be doing S&P, but the guys were calling, and finally he decided one time to answer them! So he may have been one of the first to actually start running people.

He had a Collins KW-1. Later on, of course, I said, “Well, you’re not operating the CW contests, you’re only operating the phone contests, so how about if I come over there and operate the CW contests?” He thought about it and said, “Okay, come ahead.” That was the beginning of a wonderful friendship. A wonderful guy.

NCJ: Well, you’ve just described a big change that is probably for the better. I think that we would agree that it’s better that we can work more than six Brits on 20 meters. There have been a number of changes in contesting at different points in your career, but particularly earlier. It wasn’t too long ago that we logged on paper, Germany was two countries, and we had to wait for our radios to warm up. Give us your take on those changes. Which have been good, and which have been bad?

K3ZO: Speaking of logging on paper [laughs], I used to have to take Monday off after the DX contest, so I could do my check sheet. It was pretty hard to keep a running check sheet, with the tremendous



Figure 2 — Hobnobbing in 1974 with Washington dignitaries during a visit to WA3NAN — the Goddard Space Flight Center Amateur Radio Club station: (L-R) W4ZM, W3MSK/W3AU, W3ABC, K3ZO (then W9SZR), and W4GF. [NASA photo]

number of call signs and the space it would take up in front of your operating position. In those days you were penalized for dupes. I would spend the day Monday taking my dupes out and marking the log. After that, of course, you would mail it in. You couldn’t send it in by Internet, because it didn’t exist. I have to say that the Cabrillo file format that N5KO invented is a godsend, because you now use it for every contest. It makes it so much easier, because every contest submission is basically identical. That’s a tremendous improvement over what we used to have.

As far as what may have been better in the old days, I guess, is that, strangely enough, there were a lot more stations on the air from Africa than there are now, because we still had all the colonials there. Now, most African countries, unless you have a DXpedition, are not represented in contests. There was a whole bunch of resident operators on from there when I first got on in DX contests.

NCJ: What about the kinds of skills you need to be a contester? Do you think the game of contesting, in terms of the skills you need to succeed, is different today than it used to be?

K3ZO: It depends on the contest. I still think that DX contests require the greatest variety of skills. You’re not just working for rate. You have to know call signs, you have to dig deep sometimes to get the call through. Right now our club is making a

big push for the NAQP, and they’ve asked me to participate. But, I have a DX station, and I built my station to work DX contests. I don’t blame others for being enthusiastic about what I consider lesser contests. I do Sweepstakes, because it’s a legacy contest. But I’m not much of a domestic contester, I’m afraid. I think a lot of them are strictly rate. You might as well do the DL2CC computer program, where, if you get it right, you move to the next level of speed. I’m not a speed merchant. The RBN tells me that I am usually calling CQ at about 23 WPM, and that’s what I like to do.

NCJ: You mentioned activity in Africa and how that has changed over the decades. I think you have an interesting perspective on ham radio in other parts of the world, because you’ve lived there — especially in Thailand, where you still have a lot of connections. Do you think that ham radio contesting is on the uptick there, or are there trends that should worry us?

K3ZO: I do think that contesting is on the uptick in most of the Southeast Asia countries. I know that people on the West Coast feel that there aren’t as many JAs to work in contests anymore. They’ve all gotten older, and they’ve all become more DXers than contesters, although there’s a bunch of young JAs coming along, too. But in places like China, Thailand, Indonesia, there’s tremendous growth in HF licensees, and many of them are becoming interested in contesting.

Certainly in Thailand they are getting more enthusiastic about it. As many know, HSØAC [the club station of the Radio Amateur Society of Thailand] was devastated by a flood, and the people who rebuilt HSØAC are all Thais now, not a bunch of foreigners as it used to be. The people who operate HSØAC are all Thais as well. That's a tremendously optimistic development, in my opinion. And, you've got people like E21EIC, Champ, who is a protégé of mine. I've taught him a lot of stuff, but he now knows more than I do about contesting, and he's up to date on all the modern trends. He's teaching all the other guys. He has a VE group that gives examinations to Thais all over the country, and they even do exams in Malaysia and Laos. He's pushing the contest motif every chance he gets. He's an advertisement for contesting. So, based on what's happening in Thailand, I'm sure that something similar is happening in China. In Indonesia, I was down at the Southeast Asia Net Convention in Bali last year, and they're seeing tremendous growth in real HFers, so you have to be very optimistic about what's happening.

NCJ: I've heard that there's tremendous VHF contest activity in Thailand as well. And that the number of VHF contesters in Thailand is really pretty huge.

K3ZO: Well, here's what's happened. Historically, the Thai government was against pushing HF radio, because there was a feeling among the old line bureaucrats — a lot of military officers — that you couldn't monitor the HF ham radio bands adequately, and there might be subversion going on. Ham radio was suspect 30 or 40 years ago in the military community. Why would you need a radio to talk to anybody when there was the telephone? There had to be a nefarious reason for anyone to have a radio. The new people running the telecommunications administration in Thailand don't share this feeling, but it's been a hard adjustment to make. So, they haven't given many exams allowing people to upgrade to the HF license. The Novice license only allows 2 meter channelized FM operation.

So, there are 325,000 hams in Thailand, and very few of them — maybe 700 or 800 — have HF privileges. However Champ, with his VE exams, has gotten the authorities there to say that if you pass the US General class license examination or higher, you can apply to upgrade your Thai license to HF status. So, that's helped a lot. And RAST has recently convinced the Thai government to give the HF upgrade exam. Three times in the last 3 years they have given the regular HF exam.

By the way, they have not eliminated the Morse code requirement in Thailand. They've eliminated the *sending* test, be-



Figure 3 — (L-R): HC1KA, W3ABC, LU6HDV, and K3ZO. Fred relates, "This was the occasion in 1975, when my good friend Carlos Fenosi, LU6HDV, came up from Argentina to visit me. He had been the 'Chief Engineer' of my Argentine station LU5HF1, when I worked there, kept my gear repaired and working, so I could get in all the major contests from down there (1972-1974). I took him over to Goddard, since his good friend Dr Mario Acuña, LU9HBG/W3, (not pictured) was a senior NASA scientist [NASA photo]"

cause administratively it was very hard to handle it, but you still have to receive 8 WPM.

NCJ: More than in the US.

K3ZO: Right. People like Champ are proud that they still have a CW exam. However, if you go the VE route, you can get around it. [laughs]. It's funny. But they recently gave an upgrade exam in Thailand, and 67 people passed the Morse test, and 67 people upgraded, because everyone who passed the CW test also passed the written exam. So, CW is like the barrier there. But there isn't much push to eliminate the CW exam. CW in Thailand — because a lot of Thais don't speak English that well — is considered the great equalizer. People don't have to worry that their accent is so bad that people can't understand them and so forth. So, there's a great deal of acceptance of the CW requirement in Thailand, and the only problem has been a lack of examination sessions. Now that the problem is being whittled away, I think you're going to find — you're already beginning to find — a lot more Thais on HF.

NCJ: That's interesting. Let's switch topics here a little bit. You do a lot of things, and one of them has been your involvement

in the CQ World Wide Contest Committee. I know that you are a good friend of Bob Cox, K3EST, who was, of course, the director for all those years. In the last WW contest — there's no way to say this nicely — there was a large number of disqualifications. From your perspective, based on your long experience in contesting, when it comes to people following the rules, is anything really different today? Or have we just gotten better at finding ways to catch people? Do you think that ethics in contesting have deteriorated?

K3ZO: It's hard to know how many people we were catching when we had to do paper checking, because we had none of these computer aids or anything like them. I originally got involved with the WW committee because Bob Cox was originally the tenant in this house. He couldn't afford to buy it, but I came back from overseas after having my experience in Argentina, and I was looking to find a place to set up a contest station. Bob invited me out here for a party, and I said "Boy, this is perfect, you know?" [There were] 120 feet between the back of my yard and the back of my house, perfectly aligned for an 80 meter dipole broadside to Europe, so that sort of sold me. And then Gene Zimmerman, W3ZZ (SK) — who, of course, was a very good mutual friend, and much missed, I might add — said that Bob couldn't afford to buy the place, and the owner wants to sell, why don't *you* buy it? So, I did, and I've been here ever since. It's turned out to be a wonderful QTH. So, I really owe Bob Cox a great deal of thanks for finding this place for me.

As for the ethics of contesting, I remember when we were checking everything by hand. We had to use our knowledge and some guesswork, and I remember catching one PY4 because he had salted his 10 meter log with a whole bunch of call signs of guys who hadn't been active in 15 years or so. That was an obvious case we could DQ, but how many other people were getting away with cheating, we don't know. I don't think we began to get anywhere close to catching the number of people who were actually cheating.

Also, there are some things that we didn't consider cheating then. The idea of what isn't allowed has changed. As the old timers will recall, the ARRL DX Contest used to be two weekends, each mode. So, in the good old PVRC days, W4BVV worked for the NSA, and he had access to some groundbreaking mainframe computers. An operator at W4BVV for the second weekend of the ARRL contest would have a nice printout of all the call signs that had been worked the first weekend, in order, on each band. That was, you know, groundbreaking at the time. After the first

weekend of the contest, people would get together at the regular PVRC meeting, and somebody would say, "What was the call of that ET3?" And someone would say, "Well, that was ET3AA." And that wasn't considered to be bad. In the meeting you worked out the calls that you hadn't copied. Everybody would go back and correct their logs according to what they heard at the meeting, and it was considered perfectly okay. So, things have also changed about what's allowed and what isn't.

NCJ: That's interesting. I know that PVRC has been a big part of your years in ham radio contesting. Maybe you can tell us a little about how you happened to land in the DC area and in the line of work you did, and how ham radio had an impact on that.

K3ZO: As I said earlier, I flunked out of college three times, because I majored in W9YT. In those days you had to declare your major before you ever set foot on campus. So, I said, well, I'm a ham I guess I should go for electrical engineering. That didn't turn out to be my thing. I thought I was going to be let loose in an engineering lab right off the bat, and I had no idea that I'd have to take organic chemistry and mechanical drawing and that kind of stuff first. Finally, the assistant dean of engineering called me in, after I had flunked out for the third time, and he said that if you're ever going to graduate from this university, you're not going to graduate in engineering. So, I asked, "What would you suggest?" And he replied, "You did all right in some political science classes, so why don't you take that?" That's how I ended up with a political science major and a minor in journalism, and that worked out very well for me.

But while I was at the university, and this was due to ham radio, W9RBI, who was a big DXer, said, "Why don't you come to work for us at WIBA?" He was an engineer at the WIBA radio station, and I did have my FCC third-class commercial license, and without ever applying for the job, I was hired at WIBA, because he liked me, and they needed a relief engineer during the summer when their guys would go off on vacation. I had gotten to the point where I was ready to graduate, but I needed a couple more credits, and I could take anything. So, I took a course in speech called "Fundamentals of Broadcasting." Because of my WIBA experience, I knew all the stuff backward and forward, and I could just answer the exam questions without even reading the textbook. The professor started talking one day about careers in broadcasting, and he mentioned the Voice of America. And, I thought it would be interesting to go to Washington to work for the Voice of America. So, when the VOA recruiter came one day to campus,

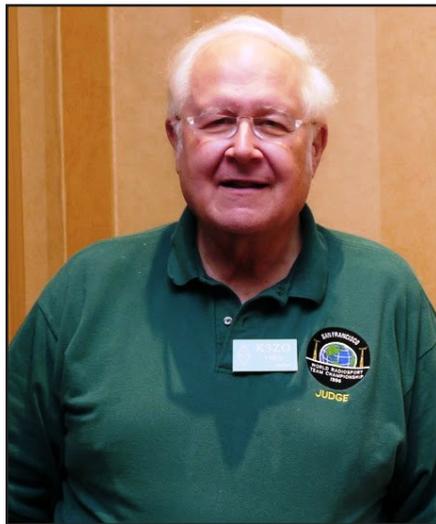


Figure 4 — K3ZO today. [N6TV photo]

I went to talk to him, and he said, "Look, you've got five semesters of Spanish, why don't you consider our foreign service?" And I said, "I didn't realize you guys had a foreign service." And he said, "Oh yes, it's called the US Information Service. You take the same Foreign Service exam as the State Department [people] do. So, I took it, I passed, and I came to Washington. And then of course I was in the Foreign Service, so I only did a little bit of training here, and then I was sent to the Dominican Republic. That was my first overseas post. So, that's how I got into it. It was thanks to my broadcasting professor that got me into the queue, and I never did any other interview at the university — that was the only one I went to.

NCJ: And in those days, of course, PVRC was alive and well. I assume they scooped you up right away?

K3ZO: Well, before I ever came to Washington, I wrote Vic Clark [W4KFC] a letter and asked, "How do I join PVRC?" I was welcomed with open arms the minute I got here. And I got in league with Jack Colson, W3TMZ, because I rented a room in the Washington area that was not too far from his QTH. So, I ended up doing multi-single there right off the bat, later on graduating to W4BVV and W3MSK.

NCJ: Fascinating! I wonder if you could convey to *NCJ* readers a little bit about how tuning the bands today is different. If you were to flip your radio on right now and tune the band, what's the difference in what you hear compared to what you might have heard, say, 30 or 40 years ago?

K3ZO: Oh, there's a big difference now. Thirty or forty years ago there was almost as much activity outside of contests on any given day as there was during contests. Now, there's no comparison at all. A lot of

times these days during the week you're kind of hoping that none of the other entities that would like to have our bands are listening, because it sounds like nobody's using them, except usually in the teletype part of the bands there are a couple of people. It's amazing how many people aren't doing general operating anymore.

But when contesting comes along, there's more participation than ever. And I think the reason is that you can't duplicate contesting on the Internet. It's the one aspect of Amateur Radio that is still not possible to do Internet-wise. Whereas, now, if you're talking to your friends, you don't have to get them on the air to talk to them. Even I've become converted to Skype. Except for our schedule with Thailand every week, which is more of an interest in propagation than anything else, I do my long-distance rag chewing with people on Skype. So, I think that the Internet has changed what we use ham radio for, except for contesting. And that isn't possible. So, there's more activity in contesting than ever.

NCJ: Well, the numbers certainly reflect that. Why don't you bring us up to date on what you're doing right now. You're certainly a guy who's given back to the hobby. Anyone who is taking on an entire QSL bureau [W3 QSL Bureau] has demonstrated that. What are you up to, and what kinds of things still give you a kick in terms of operating and contesting?

K3ZO: Well, my dear wife — my late wife, Somporn, we were married for almost 25 years — she said, "Why don't you give something back to the hobby that you've enjoyed for so many years?" At first, I became a DXCC card checker for the MDC section, and they invited me to take the Zs for the W3 QSL bureau, which was in Pennsylvania at the time. Because I was getting more cards than any of the other Zs, I said okay. And then when Mary Ann, W3HUP, decided to give it up, and the Pennsylvania group was kind of falling apart, they had the idea that PVRC might take it over, and that I would be the chairman. I chose NCDXA, because it was more along NCDXA's line as a pure DX association rather than just contesters. That's the way I got into that.

I've also been a board member of the Yasme Foundation for many years, ever since my event in Argentina, and I got back and Lloyd and Iris [Colvin] asked me to join the Yasme board. I think I can take credit for NØAX's being on our board, because I was the one who took him to lunch and asked him to join us. So, I feel good about that, and I recently got my eventual replacement on the board, too, in the form of Ken, K4ZW. We're going to serve a couple of years jointly, and then I'll probably bow out. I figure at age 80, I should probably

start dropping a few of my responsibilities. So, that's how I got into it.

The bureau is starting to lose a little volume now to LoTW. It's still a little expensive, though, for somebody from overseas to be on LoTW. You can imagine, you know, somebody in Greece right now, who has to pony up \$5 to register; as I understand it, it's not so easy for people overseas. I don't think that you're going to see bureau QSLing completely die away.

NCJ: Well, it certainly hasn't for those of us who live within range of Japan.

K3ZO: [laughs]

NCJ: What about on the air? I know you're on in all the contests. Tell us a little about what your philosophy is in operating contests these days?

K3ZO: Well, I am a DX contester. I do Sweepstakes as a legacy contest, but I'm not much of a domestic contest fan. I do the Wisconsin QSO Party every year, because I run into a lot of friends. It's a chance to touch base with them at least once a year. I don't do the QSO party as a lot of people do, where you're just chasing mobiles on CW as they move from one county to the

other to become another multiplier. I like to get on 40 meter phone, which is a good skip distance to Wisconsin from here, and call "CQ Wisconsin" and work different Wisconsin people. That's my idea of the most fun in contesting — to work the greatest number of different hams, and not the same people on every band. Somehow I feel that spreading the word to the greatest number of different people is what I feel best about.

NCJ: Well, you're certainly in a lot of *NCJ* readers' logbooks, and we hope to continue seeing you there for many years. I know we haven't scratched the surface of many of your stories and experiences. I appreciate you being our first subject for this new *NCJ* feature.

K3ZO: I'd like to add one other thing that I didn't mention when we were talking about the increase in contesting overseas. I do think that I had some influence in getting the LUs more interested in contesting when I was down there, and the HKs as well. I knew HK1X when he was just a teenager, and I think that I might have had something to do with his establishing a

group there that was the first, first-rate multi station in Colombia, for example.

NCJ: Yes. And the uptick in contesting in South America is obvious. Certainly with their team's participation in the WRTCs, and with Brazil hosting the WRTC in 2006, their profile in contesting has really shot way up.

K3ZO: I agree 100 percent. I think that Latin America is taking off. The economy is improving. In general the trend is up in all of Latin America, and I think that's great. I've served in several Latin American countries. For example, in HI now, you've got HI3TEJ and HI3NR, and these are all local guys. You don't have to have an American going down there and operating a contest expedition anymore. There's plenty of HIs on the air. So, I do think that Latin America is a bright spot, and I'm pleased about the way things are going there.

NCJ: That's a wonderful place to close. Thanks again for your time.

K3ZO: I am happy to participate.