

Meet the Tennessee Contest Group — 30 Years of Contesting Excitement

Clubs are the heartbeat of radio contesting. As with most human endeavors, once there are more than a few people involved in any activity, things can get complicated fast. Individual goals and agendas may not always align, and contesting has its share of, shall we say, strong personalities. It's been my great honor to be part of the Tennessee Contest Group (TCG) since its early days. All through the good times, bad times, and everything in between, TCG has been the bedrock of my contesting activities for the last 30 years.

TCG began with none other than a *National Contest Journal* event

during the 1993 CW North American QSO Party. Jim, K4AMC, and Ric, WA6KUI (now WO4O), decided to form a team with the goal of making a competitive score in the NAQP Team competition. Jim and Ric managed to recruit Don, N4ZZ, and Gary, AA4DO. To their surprise, these four operators won the Team Competition. K4AMC coined the name "Tennessee Contest Group," which has stuck to this day, 30 years later.

The same group decided to meet at a Nashville-area breakfast joint, and they invited a few others. WA6KUI brought in Mark, KØEJ, and the two of them started the hunt for more

contest operators in and around Tennessee. These early meetings were the initial eyeball QSOs for all of us. For me personally, these meetings were an introduction to the most enthusiastic, intelligent, knowledgeable, and humorous radio ops I'd ever met. These were exciting times! Attendees at these early meetings included Jim, K4AMC; Ric, WA6KUI (WO4O); Mark, KØEJ; Doug, W9WI; Don, N4ZZ; Scott, W4PA; Kirk, WR3O (now K4RO); Billy, AA4NU; Jeff, KQ4HC (K4JNY), and others.

After a couple of years of fun competing together as a group in most of the non-ARRL contests, we



TCG lunch gathering in 2023. [Kirk Pickering, K4RO, photo]



TN QSO Party plaque handmade by KØEJ. [Kirk Pickering, K4RO, photo]

decided to pursue the required ARRL affiliation so that we could compete in ARRL-sponsored contests. This was a bit of a challenge, as our mantra up to that point had been “No dues, no paperwork, no officers — just contesting excitement!” As was often the case, KØEJ stepped up to do the necessary hard work. Mark wrote our constitution and bylaws, and spearheaded the effort to make TCG an official club. At the time, ARRL club affiliation required regular in-person meetings, but we were already surpassing those requirements. Remember, this was still in the glorious pre-internet days, and we relished getting together to share information with each other.

Among the notable achievements of the early TCG era was a lobbying effort spearheaded by Tom Delker, K1KY. At the time, ARRL had a 175-mile club radius. The geometry of the state of Tennessee meant that we had to exclude the western

and eastern parts of our state but could include members in Georgia and Kentucky. We really wanted to compete as the Tennessee Contest Group and encouraged surrounding states to form similar statewide groups. K1KY’s exceptional lobbying efforts paid off. We could now compete as a statewide group. K1KY also led a significant recruitment effort, greatly expanding the visibility of TCG across the state. The Radius OR Section club rule is still on the ARRL books some 26 years later. When you want the impossible done, call K1KY. ARRL just this year increased the radius from 175 to 250 miles, which just happens to be big enough to include the entire state, plus some surrounding areas.

Thanks to the efforts of Trey Garlough, N5KO, contesting discussion was brought into the internet age. The CQ Contest Reflector was attracting computer-savvy contest operators from around the globe. I

was one of the lucky ops with internet connectivity and soon set up a primitive email reflector for the TCG. It wasn’t long before every member was online, learning to navigate the new medium that had been thrust upon us. More discussion was happening online. Less discussion was happening face-to-face. The discussions online were more detailed and perhaps more focused, but something was lost. There were tangible and intangible factors, both positive and negative, which changed the culture in the post-internet era. Meetings were now held once per month, as required by ARRL. This requirement would soon go the way of the written letter.

With our continually expanding roster came some growing pains. It seemed like all of a sudden, there were lots of new faces, and not just the familiar grizzled guard that had been the core of TCG for a few years. The growing roster, coupled

with the new internet “flame war” mentality, resulted in some personal-ity clashes, including the occasional disruptor, but the club remained strong throughout this period of transition. The usual stalwarts kept us on a steady course through the rough seas. TCG remained a vibrant contesting force, and comments such as “It seems like every contest is a TN QSO party these days” were not uncommon.

TCG had a few brightly shining stars at this time, with several TCG ops regularly making the Top Ten or even winning contests on occasion. N4ZZ was usually leading the pack while the rest of us tried to keep up with Don. W4PA was traveling to very competitive stations and racking up an impressive operating resume while giving a considerable bump to the TCG club scores. TCG was fielding several teams in every *NCJ* Sprint and NAQP contest. Activity was off the charts across the state. We were making hundreds of thousands of QSOs on an annual basis.

One of the generators of those

QSOs was the so-called “RadioActive Report.” This was an intra-club competition to see who could make the most QSOs in one year. Chuck, KE4OAR, and Greg, K4KO, spent considerable time keeping track of the totals. Our annual QSO general went from 210,000 in 2001 to 358,000 in 2011. N4ZZ dominated the award until Jim, AD4EB, decided to go after it. Don and Jim went on later to become one of the premier mobile teams in the TN QSO Party, which was resurrected by W9WI. The RadioActive Award continues to this day, now renamed the “Most Radioactive” award. Ted, W4NZ, has been doing the tabulating. TCG makes more than a quarter million QSOs per year.

TCG slowly matured into an important part of the world’s contesting community. TCG members can be seen sharing their joy and enthusiasm in a number of venues — giving talks at clubs and hamfests, participating in Contest University at Dayton, penning articles, and most importantly, getting on the air to operate

contests. TCG is proud to sponsor a number of operating awards. We sponsor the TN QSO Party, which is a fun event every September. Awards include handmade folk-art plaques from the KØEJ workshop. We have sponsored tents at WRTC in 2014, 2018, and 2022. TCG also contributes to WA7BNM, Youth on the Air, and other organizations that support contesting.

TCG turned 30 years old in 2023 — not bad for something that started as a one-off ad hoc group of folks who were interested in operating a radio contest as a team. That initial spark has been fanned into a flame of burning enthusiasm, which has now been shining for over 30 years. Our membership hovers around 100, and new members join us every couple of months or so. Having survived the growing pains and transformations over the years, we’re older now and perhaps a bit wiser. Our prime directive remains the same — have fun contesting! We each get to determine what “fun” means, and sharing our joy of contesting is what it’s all about.