Courtney Duncan, N5BF

Op Ed: UR 599 OM PSE RPT ALL

Years ago — it would have been in the early 1970s — I looked on as an Elmer, W5LHX, helped his protégé WB5FID set up his HF station. Later on that Saturday morning in Central Texas, when they reached the point where it looked as though the rig ought to be ready to go, W5LHX ("Mr. Peters" to Rob and me) picked up the microphone and called "CQ" on 40 meter phone in a rather hasty, nearly impatient way. After the second try (ie, within 45 seconds) WA5YEA responded from about 100 miles away and gave a signal report. The HW-100 and low dipole were, in fact, getting out more or less as expected. I was surprised to see how easy it was to get that confirmation.

Today my location in the northern foothills of the Los Angeles Basin of Southern California overlooks tens of thousands of radio amateurs and is within HF range of tens of thousands more. Yet a random contact, even on a popular band or repeater, is not as easy to snag. I have to take some of the blame. The places I hang out (such as 1.810 MHz CW, 223.5 MHz FM, 1296.1 MHz SSB) are pretty quiet. Someone looking for a "radio check" on one of those frequencies is checking out a station that is at least a little removed from the mainstream.

Mostly for the sake of efficiency, I have learned to use operating events such as contests to evaluate my station in its ever-changing state. My personal favorites are the end-of-year HF contests, such as the ARRL November Sweepstakes, the Top Band and 10 meter events as well as the various VHF and UHF outings spread throughout the calendar. These provide many opportunities to check out the performance of my equipment and antennas under various conditions.

My results have ranged from *nearly* being heard by one 40 over S-9 station on my first attempt at 160 meters to working seven grid squares with 5 W on 2 meter SSB. Both situations epitomize representations of some station I had put together. This has been educational.

Since I use contests to check out my station, I'm one of those operators who appreciates a *real* signal report, something you are more likely to get in a random, leisurely QSO (along with a bunch of advice) than in a contest. The joke among my friends is, "UR 599 OM PSE RPT ALL." Translated from CW-speak into English, this means, "Your signal is perfectly readable without interference, level is top of the scale, tone is perfect and I didn't copy a thing you just sent; please send it all again."

In one of those Zen-like moments during last year's ARRL 10 Meter Contest it came to me what was going on. The "59" or "599" in the exchange is *not* a signal report; it is synchronization. I know when to expect it and about how long it will be. On CW it quickly accustoms me to the operator's fist and speed, on phone to his voice and cadence. I'm charged up, ready to get that next piece of information that actually *is* unique and important. Was that "TN" or "TX?"

But a bit down the log an operator gives me a report of "57," snapping me out of my reverie. My fingers come off the keyboard, the rhythm is broken and I miss what follows. I glance at my own S meter. Sure enough, he's 4×7 on my end. Even so I give him a 59. That's what's programmed in.

Here's a suggestion: Add an actual signal report elsewhere in the exchange. Sure, contest contacts need synchronization. At the same time they should provide a meaningful signal report for the stations involved. So, call the "599" a synchronization word. It's not cheating. Digital computers, which allegedly get everything perfect, use handshaking and synchronization protocols to exchange messages accurately. Analog human beings can use help like that too. Calling it "synchronization" will also prevent that 1 percent of operators from handing out actual signal reports instead of "599" and confusing everyone.

Here's how it could work. On Top Band, for instance, the exchange might be "599 LAX 319." That information would be really useful to me. Sure, the fact that I can hear the static crashes and the slow fades and that it took both of us three tries to copy each other's exchange tells me that we were both really 319 or less. But now I've got to make a non-standard entry in my contest log to capture this information, an entry right next to the "599" that I copied.

Of course this complicates the keyer and the parroted programming the serious participants use, but their radios are hooked up to computers anyway. How hard would it be to read the S meter as part of the interface in a modern rig? I bet we could even use spectral analysis to come up with a fair and accurate evaluation of "readability" and "tone" too. The whole report *still* could be automated. Those of us who are able to provide reasonably accurate evaluations by ear could, of course, still could do so.[1]

Don't take away my exchange synchronization, but *do* let me know how I'm getting out. That's the reason I'm participating in the contest in the first place.

Courtney Duncan, N5BF (WB5GRZ in the early 1970s), has been an officer in the Jet Propulsion Laboratory Amateur Radio Club and of AMSAT-NA. He currently tinkers with hardware and software projects for an ever-developing "Barely Works Technology" amateur "research" station in his home, following the contributions of W7PUA, W1GHZ and many others. His Elmer was Phil Woodard, W5KRZ. See ***http://cbduncan.110mb.com/HamRadio/HamRadio.html****.*

[1] "Can You *Read* Me Now?" Steve Sant Andrea, AG1YK, April 2011 *QST*, p 68.

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