

Ten ways to have the most fun in Ham Radio

- a sort of op ed by Jim Stafford, W4QO

When non hams, who are looking at getting their ham licenses, ask me what they should do, I give them this list of what I think are the 10 things to increase their ham radio FUN!! I'll write this as if I'm speaking to YOU the prospective ham. If you are already a TECH and tired of those 2M repeaters, you may skip step #2, but do NOT skip the others!

1. Get a used HF rig – a \$200 transceiver from eBay

I was browsing around eBay today and saw several digital readout solid state rigs for under \$200. Granted they were 25 years old and the displays looked like NIXIE tubes but there they were. I recommend this because you can use them to make contacts when you get your license but more importantly it becomes a piece of test equipment for when you build your first transceiver (see step #6). Most of these solid state rigs are easy to tune and go down to 5 watts of course! At that level of power, you'll be able to join that great bunch of folks who operate QRP. And short of buying a transceiver, if you talk real nice to a ham whose has been having all this fun for 10 or 20 years, you'll find they probably have a rig they will loan you, some permanently!

2. Listen/Study/Get your license/callsign(2x3)

With the rig above (which you could sell for what you have in it if you decide this FUN isn't for you), you can begin to listen to the bands and get a "feel" for how to operate (but steer clear of 75M). You'll also be able to begin to copy code, even W1AW code practice. You can go to a number of online sites to get the free question pool for your Technician license. Many sites will also give you sample tests and they grade them for you. If you need some help, get the ARRL license manual or sign up for the ARRL online course which includes the license manual in the price. Soon you'll take the test and get your 2x3 callsign. Oh, you might also check with your local radio club (most can be found on the ARRL site) and they may either have classes for you or have a mentor to help you.

3. Learn the code (CW) –get your General (1x3)

Now you could just repeat #2 and study for the General test. And yes, you need to do that to have the MOST fun in ham radio but you'll miss out on a lot of fun if you don't learn the Morse code. There are so many programs you can use to learn the code from the internet that it will make your head spin. I like the G4FON program but if you have one of those new fangled MP3 players, do not miss out on the K7QO code course. All these may be found with the google button. And remember, you can use your tech license on the CW bands down there on say 40 meters with that OLDIE rig you got on ebay! Don't worry that you don't go very fast. Most will slow down for you and if you check with the SKCC or FISTS, they have frequencies where they encourage slow CW. It's always easier to send than receive, so use that key to send even if it's only to yourself. Worried about copying, use a program like CW GET to run in the background. Oh sure, it's a

crutch but it might help you. One more point – remember those QRP nuts? They tend to run much slower CW and you don't have to run QRP to talk to one of them. There are lists of QRP calling frequencies at multiple sites on the web but start with 7.030 or 7.040. Somewhere in here, you'll take and pass the General test but stay away from the mic a few more weeks if at all possible. And while you're at it get yourself one of those old time callsigns that used to be reserved for higher classed licensees. What I mean is get a 1x3 call. Act your age! Maybe you can just drop the second letter of the first callsign you received or maybe you can get your initials.

4. Get your QSL card – cheapqsl.com (\$12)

Now when you get that Tech license you could order some QSLs or you could make them with John, WA8RCR's QSL Maker program since you'll be getting a new 1x3 callsign soon. These can be personalized and the program is FREE. But when/if you get a new callsign, check out the huge number of QSL printers out there, but for the buck (and for service), I don't think you can beat cheapQSLs and Sue. The price is right and she has some "cool" designs. Use these like business cards when you go to ham club meetings, hamfests, etc. They are also good to hand to a non ham who sees your callsign license plate.

5. Make a CW contact, then 10, then 100 (SKCC)

Somewhere in around step #2, start making contacts – CW that is. Write down on a card strings of what you would send such as MY QTH IS... MY ANTENNA IS... Just about anything you can think of that you would want to send. I WORK FOR... I HAVE 6 KIDS... you get the idea. Once you make one QSO, make 10, etc. You might want to join FISTS and/or SKCC. There is also a yahoo group that's called HamRadioHelpGroup you might want to join. They are very helpful You could also post your questions at the QRP Forum on the qrparci.org site. You've probably joined QRP ARCI or some of the other great QRP clubs by now.

6. Build your own (QRP) rig – SW-40 or TenTec or ???

Now here is what separates the men from the boys. Very few hams have actually built and operated their own transceiver. There are few thrills that exceed the sound of that transceiver when you turn it on and hear that signal coming through, unless it's hearing someone come back to your signal when you call them on a rig you built! We're talking QRP here. Think of it – the power of one of those screw- in Christmas tree light bulbs and using it to talk to someone in the next state or across the world! As to rigs, go for a kit. There is a "learning module" called ELMER 101 written to go along with the Small Wonder Labs SW-40. You learn a lot while you build it. But check the web and post to the qrp-tech yahoo group for more help.

7. Go for an award – WAS, WAC, collecting QSLs

Yes, there are thousands of awards out there. It is also quite a thrill to get a QSL in the mailbox. Just collecting the QSLs is fun. I used to put them on the wall with a thumbtack but that was before I owned my own house! Get one of those

Worked All States maps and yes, color it in when you work a state. If you have kids in the early grades, they will enjoy helping you on this. If you get frustrated getting return QSLs (I know, it's hard to believe that all hams do not send cards for all contacts), you can get awards from QRP ARCI without cards BUT you have to have made the QSOs at the QRP level (5w CW, 10w SSB).

8. Enter a contest – Spartan Sprint, QRP ARCI Party

Now all may not agree with this one but you should try it. Get onto those QRP contests first, then into some of the bigger ones. By now your CW will be a bit faster, but the QRP contests also are slower and less pressure. One that is a lot of fun is the Spartan Sprint – the first Monday of each month. Also, the NAQC Club runs a different contest each month so give it a go as the Brits say. You may find you like it and it's a good way to pick up those states and countries.

9. Build your antenna & go TO THE FIELD

Of course, you will have had to build an antenna sometime up there around Step #2 but this one is listed here because it is FUN to try different antennas when you take you radio outside and operate. There is nothing like the smell of the outdoors while you are operating. You can do it impromptu or you can do it with a group such as Field Day which comes up in late June. And while I'm on it – DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT buy a wire antenna! You'll spend like 5 to 10 times as much as the parts you use and they are fun to build. Now for your "base" station, you'll probably want to make the antenna pretty substantial but for those field antennas, they can be pretty flimsy and still work so they can be fun to experiment with. You say you live in a deed restricted location, well, antenna experimentation is the thing for you. They are called stealth antennas, so don't give up. And don't forget you can always go "to the field" to do your operating.

10. Upgrade to Extra Class

By now you know how to do this – so what's your excuse?

So that's about it. From here you can fill in the next 10 bullets. How about all the varied aspects of ham radio from digital to satellites to public service to give you years of thrills? But whatever you do, don't overlook the fun of CW. Like Ward Silver, W0AX, said in a recent op ed on the subject, "just because they invited cameras didn't mean people stopped painting!" Just because you don't have to pass a CW exam in today's amateur radio tests, doesn't mean you can't (or shouldn't) learn CW and enjoy the fun right along with QRP. That's my opinion.