

Southern Highlands Congress 2024

Rakesh Kumar

Our popular annual Congress was held over the weekend of 2-3 November and was again a great success, even though post-COVID table numbers have remained lower than hoped for. Special thanks to the many SHBC committee members and volunteers who helped with the organisation, as well as to Jo Goodacre for the marvellous catering!

The format for both days was as usual 6 × 9-board matches with IMPs scoring. Both the Swiss Pairs on the Saturday and the Teams on the Sunday were once again ably directed by Jeff Carberry.

In the Swiss Pairs, the winners in the 10-table Open section were Helena Dawson - David Weston, closely followed by Sandy Carter - Nerida Gillies, with Wing Roberts - Mick McAuliffe in third place. The award for best regional pair went to SHBC members Tony Lye - Stephen Brabyn. The Restricted section, which pleasingly had as many tables as the Open, was won by Lucy D'Ambrosio - Kevin Hughes, with SHBC members Kirsten Hartley - Simon Elderfield in second place and Maggie Havyatt - David Havyatt coming third.

Swiss Pairs rewards hyper-aggressive bidding of games, putting the defenders to the test. Slams *always* swing IMPs at Swiss Pairs, so pushing for slam contracts is also a good idea. With that in mind, here are two hands for you to consider. Firstly, after your LHO passes, partner opens 1D promising 4+ cards and RHO overcalls 1S, what will you bid with this hand?

♠K9
♥K52
♦JT9
♣AJT97

Secondly, after partner opens 1D as dealer, then raises your 1H response to 3H, what will you do next?

♠K987
♥AJ74
♦Q7
♣KQ2

The board associated with the first question is shown on the following page.

BD: 10	♠K9	Dlr: E	
	♥K52	Vul: ALL	
	♦JT9		
	♣AJT97		
♠AQJT2		♠65	
♥AT43		♥9876	
♦8		♦Q643	
♣Q65		♣842	
	♠8743		
	♥QJ		
	♦AK752		
	♣K3		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
		T	
N	5 5 1 2 5		12
S	5 5 1 2 5	13	2
E			13
W			

With the North hand, a fairly normal response to 1D after the 1S overcall would be 2NT, promising some 11-12 hcp and a stopper in spades. However, at Swiss Pairs, being normal is rarely rewarded. With a possible source of tricks in clubs plus high hopes of tricks from partner in diamonds, a direct bid of 3NT is a potential winner. Of course, it might not make, but the reward for a vulnerable game is substantial.

In fact with clubs 3-3 and both club and diamond finesses working, 11 tricks were not difficult after a spade lead, despite the 4-1 break in diamonds. In the Open, 4 pairs out of 10 did bid 3NT, but none did so in the Restricted.

Aggressive bidding was similarly rewarded on the deal featured in the second problem. For the jump raise, partner is promising some 15-17 hcp or the equivalent, so as you hold 15 hcp you should look for slam. It proves to be cold:

BD: 15	♠K987	Dlr: S	
	♥AJ74	Vul: NS	
	♦Q7		
	♣KQ2		
♠QT6432		♠AJ5	
♥63		♥982	
♦K84		♦JT5	
♣86		♣T754	
	♠		
	♥KQT5		
	♦A9632		
	♣AJ93		

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N		
					T		
N	4	6	6	1	3		15
S	4	6	6	1	3	5	6
E							14
W							

However, only 2 pairs found the slam in the Open section – we didn't get there after Julie Bierling successfully interposed a 2S weak jump overcall, derailing the auction. No none in the Restricted section reached slam.

In the Teams, the winners were Vicky Lisle - Ian Lisle - Helena Dawson - David Weston. In second place were Catherine Chaffey - Jake Andrew - Fiona Fawcett - David Hudson, while Clare Filmer-Ramsay - Cassandra Mitchell - Michael Young - Mary Poynten were third. The best regional team was Juliet Robert - Julie Bierling - Lynda Kings - Paul McLean of SHBC.

Of the many interesting hands that arose, here's one that illustrates the quite different approach to card play one might adopt in an IMPs-scored event, where making the contract is crucial and overtricks don't matter as much. East opens 1S, South makes a borderline 2H overcall, West raises to 2S and North jumps to 4H. West leads ♠2 to East's ace and the ♠K continuation is ruffed. Now how should South play?

BD: 22	♠7654	Dir: E
	♥KT86	Vul: EW
	♦A	
	♣AJ54	
♠Q32		♠AKJT9
♥3		♥Q97
♦KT764		♦J98
♣T632		♣Q8
	♠8	
	♥AJ542	
	♦Q532	
	♣K97	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N		
					T		
N	3		6	2			12
S	3		6	2	5		13
E		1	1				10
W		1	1				

There are lots of options, but the safest involves not touching trumps. Instead South should play a diamond to the ace, ruff a spade to hand noting the fall of ♠Q, ruff a diamond, play a club to the king and then ruff another diamond noting the fall of ♦J. At this point, declarer has taken 6 tricks and these cards remain:

BD: 22	♠7	Dlr: E
	♥KT	Vul: EW
	♦-	
	♣AJ5	
♠		♠T9
♥3		♥Q97
♦KT		♦-
♣T63		♣Q
	♠-	
	♥AJ5	
	♦Q	
	♣97	

Declarer needs 4 more tricks but does not know about the location or distribution of the outstanding trumps. If she attempts to continue the cross-ruff, there is the risk that an opponent will over-ruff with the queen and play back a trump, which will be ruinous. There is a solution, however – declarer can cash ♣A, then ruff the last spade with the ace and the last diamond with the king. When ♥10 is played off dummy, declarer's jack is established as the 10th trick. Of course it is possible to make more tricks if you know where all the cards are, but at IMPs you want to be sure rather than sorry.

In the tournament, 4H was bid at 10 of 16 tables, but only 4 made it. Would you have managed to do so?

