SHBC Congress 2026

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Our always-popular annual Congress, held over the weekend of 7-8 November, was again very successful – in large part thanks to the efforts of Steve Brabyn, the organiser-in-chief, as well as of the many SHBC committee members and volunteers who helped to make it happen. The new venue at Annesley proved to be excellent. Mind you, I still believe that many attendees turn up simply because they are fans of Jo Goodacre's superb catering!

This year there was a significant increase in the number of players in the Open Pairs and also a modest increase in both the Restricted Pairs and the Teams. There were several never-before-seen high quality pairs/teams from outside the Highlands, not only from Sydney and Canberra but also further afield. The strong turnout of youth players from Sydney was especially welcome.

The usual format applied for both the Swiss Pairs on Saturday and the Teams on Sunday: 6 × 9-board matches with IMPs scoring. As in previous years, were fortunate to again have the events very ably directed by Jeff Carberry.

In the Swiss Pairs, the winners in the Open section were John Donovan - Paul Nelson from Canberra, while the Restricted section was won by Michael Green - Steve Marton from Sydney. SHBC pairs performed well in both sections, with Mardi Svensson - Rakesh Kumar finishing second in the Open and Margaret Malcolm - Fiona Khoo second in the Restricted.

In the Teams, the day belonged to the youthful Natalie Newman - Damon Flicker - Alan Stoneham - Edmond Lee. In second place were Helena Dawson - David Weston - Ian Lisle - Vicky Lisle, who were also second in 2022 and winners in 2024. Of note is that in addition, Ian and Vicky won in 2025 with different teammates, so they are making something of a habit of doing well at the SHBC Congress! As last year, the best regional team was that of Steve Brabyn - Tony Lye - Mardi Svensson - Rakesh Kumar.

Before I show you some instructive deals, try these bidding problems. Firstly, you hold:

♠QT8742
♥Q84
♦4
♣AKT

The opponents are vulnerable and you are not. LHO as the dealer opens 1C. Partner passes, RHO bids 1H and of course you overcall 1S. LHO bids 1NT which is passed around to you. Will you pass or back in with 2S?

Secondly, both sides are vulnerable and this is your hand:

♠A8742
♥T6
♦AK4
♣653

After two passes, RHO opens 1D. Will you overcall 1S?

And thirdly, you are playing against opponents whose bidding system includes a weak notrump opening (i.e. 1NT is a balanced hand with 12-14 hcp). On this deal they are vulnerable and you are not. After two passes, RHO opens 1C. You hold:

♠QJ76
♥KT8742
♦KQ
♣9

Naturally, you overcall 1H. LHO bids 1NT and this is passed back to you. Will you pass or rebid 2H?

Here's the full deal associated with the first problem, from Match 1 of the Swiss Pairs. North held the hand shown:

BD: 6 ♠QT8742 **Dlr: E**
♥Q84 **Vul: EW**
♦4
♣AKT

♠63 ♠AK5
♥T9632 ♥AJ5
♦AKT76 ♦832
♣3 ♣J765

♠J9
♥K7
♦QJ95
♣Q9842

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	1		1		11
S	1		1		7 13
E		3	4	2	9
W		3	4	2	

After 1C-P-1H-1S-1NT-P-P I did back in with 2S. Shortly thereafter, I was very sorry that I had done so, because East after passed, West decided to rebid 3D! East, looking somewhat horrified, retreated to 3NT. However, unless South finds the

utterly unlikely opening lead of a club, the contract cannot be beaten provided declarer plays for ♦QJx(x) on-side. That cost us 12 IMPs … although vigorous competition is the order of the day when playing Swiss Pairs, sometimes it pays to keep quiet. Of course East could have (should have?) rebid 4H, against which there is no defence at all.

For another cautionary tale, have a look at the South hand on this deal from Match 4 of the Pairs:

BD: 4	♠Q9 ♥A42 ♦8632 ♣QT97	**Dlr: W** **Vul: ALL**
♠KJT63 ♥J985 ♦Q5 ♣84		♠5 ♥KQ73 ♦JT97 ♣AKJ2
	♠A8742 ♥T6 ♦AK4 ♣653	

♣	♦	♥	♠	N T
N				8
S				7 14
E	2	2	3	1 2 11
W	2	2	3	1 2

After East opens 1D, you might consider overcalling 1S. Your suit is headed by the ace and you have an outside AK … but if you do, you will be sorry that you did so. West should pass and East should re-open with a double. Although East-West can make a part-score in hearts, West has excellent defence and should now pass even at the 1-level. Things will then rapidly get ugly – the contract goes two down, doubled and vulnerable, for -500 and the loss of 8 IMPs.

Ron Klinger, the most famous of all Australian bridge authors, devised a "suit quality test" which states that for an overcall, the number of cards in your suit plus the number of honours (A, K, Q, J and 10, the last two only counted if there is also a higher honour) should equal or exceed the number of tricks you are trying to take. On this hand you have 5 cards and only one honour so your suit quality test score is 6 – in other words the suit is unfit for even a 1-level overcall at IMPs, athough you might bid a little more aggressively at the 1-level when playing matchpoint pairs.

Here's the hand associated with the third problem, from Match 1 of the Teams. You are North once again:

BD: 6	♠QJ76 ♥KT8742 ♦KQ ♣9	**Dlr: E** **Vul: EW**
♠A83 ♥QJ6 ♦A2 ♣KJ874		♠T92 ♥A5 ♦J763 ♣A532
	♠K54 ♥93 ♦T9854 ♣QT6	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N			2		11
S			2		15 9
E	4	2	2	4	5
W	4	2	2	4	

Did you bid 2H? I did. You would think that after the debacle on the first problem hand, I would have learnt my lesson, but you would be wrong. It then turned out that West had a hand most of us would open 1NT, but in their system it became a 1-of-a-suit opening. When I rebid 2H, East passed but West now came back in with 2NT and East raised to 3NT. This can't be defeated if East finesses in clubs. Fortunately for me, he didn't … whew!

PS: Did you notice? In all three problem hands, the four lowest cards in the long suit were 8742. Weird!

♣♦♥♠

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