

Southern Highlands Congress 2023

Are you slam-happy?

by RAKESH KUMAR



Rakesh Kumar describes himself as an enthusiast who makes enough errors to have plenty of material for bridge columns.

This year's Southern Highlands Congress was once again a great success – and no, I'm not biased, even though the Southern Highlands Bridge Club is my home club. The organisation was excellent (many thanks to the SHBC volunteers) as was the (yum!) food. Even though the weather was damp and chilly (perfect for bridge?) those who came to play at the new venue (actually a venue from over a decade ago, reincarnated) remained warm and comfortable.

The event was run in its customary format, with Swiss Pairs on Saturday and Teams on Sunday, each comprising 6 x 9-board matches. Jeff Carberry's directing was as unflappable as ever. The only disappointment was that table numbers remained at last year's modest level – the hoped-for rebound in attendance at face-to-face events around NSW has not yet come to pass.

The weekend was full of slam decisions. Before I show you a few deals, try a couple of problems. In the Swiss Pairs, vulnerable against opponents who are not vulnerable, you hold:

♠ A
♥ AJT2
♦ A
♣ AQJ8642

LHO deals and opens 2♠, showing a weak hand with 5 spades and a 4+ minor suit. Partner passes and RHO raises to 3♠. What will you bid?

And in the Teams, with neither side vulnerable, you hold:

♠ QJ876
♥ J7
♦ AK83
♣ 93

LHO passes as dealer and partner opens 2NT, showing a 20-21 hcp hand which can include a 5-card major suit. What is your plan for the auction?

*Southern Highland Teams
Winners – Pauline Gumby,
Warren Lazer, Christine
Geromboux and
Sebastian Yuen .*



The Swiss Pairs was won by Maurits Van Der Vlugt – Dagmar Neumann, who were closely followed by Pauline Gumby – Warren Lazer. Swiss Pairs is of course all about bidding to the hilt and then some ... but on the first problem, with the hand that you hold, whatever you bid is likely to be the last word on the matter. Would you have dared to bid 6 ♣? This was the full deal:

Board 12

Dealer W | Vul NS

♠ KJT
♥ Q4
♦ J9642
♣ K53

♠ Q6432
♥ 5
♦ KQT753
♣ T

♠ A
♥ AJT2
♦ A
♣ AQJ8642

♠ 9875
♥ K98763
♦ 8
♣ 97

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	7	2	4	1	7
S	7	2	4	1	7
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

If you had, you would have taken all 13 tricks, because the heart finesse succeeds. However, to earn your reward you had to be in slam in the first place. Across the 16 tables in the Open field, only 3 bid to 6 ♣; most played in game. And then there was the table at which West chose to open a weak 2 ♦, ignoring the spade suit altogether. South doubled for takeout in case North had hearts, but this was converted to penalties because North had no obvious alternative! Yes, you guessed it, I was South ...

Here's another "would you have dared?" deal from the Swiss Pairs:

Board 27

Dealer S | Vul Nil

♠ T984
♥ 8763
♦ 9
♣ 8432

♠
♥ J542
♦ KT87652
♣ Q5

♠ KJ76532
♥ KQJ9
♦
♣ AT

♠ AQ
♥ A
♦ AQJ43
♣ KJ976

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	-	-	-	2	-
S	-	-	-	2	-
E	6	6	1	-	4
W	5	6	-	-	3

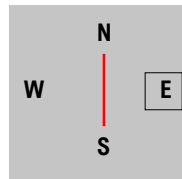
After South opens 1 ♠, if West makes a weak jump overcall of 3 ♦ – ignoring the sorry-looking 4-card heart suit – a courageous East might leap all the way to 6 ♦. However, that's an extreme action as there might be two quick losers in clubs. Perhaps East could start with 3NT – but North-South will compete to 4 ♠ over this and to 5 ♠ over East's subsequent bid of 5 ♦. Then it's decision time: a penalty double earns +500 but a 6 ♦ bid earns +920 and swings quite a few IMPs. One half of the Open field reached the slam.

In the Teams, GUMBY (Pauline Gumby – Warren Lazer with Christy Geromboux – Sebastian Yuen) had a convincing win, with FANOS (Liz Fanos – George Finikiotis with Leigh Foran – Theo Mangos) finishing second. The first match after lunch featured this deal:

Board 2
Dealer E | Vul NS

♠ QJ6543
♥ 762
♦ Q5
♣ 73

♠
♥ A5
♦ AT764
♣ KQJ986



♠ KT92
♥ 98
♦ KJ93
♣ AT4

♠ A87
♥ KQJT43
♦ 82
♣ 52

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	-	-	1	-	-
S	-	-	1	-	-
E	7	7	-	1	6
W	7	7	-	1	5

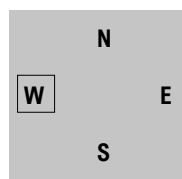
Our opponents were Maurits Van Der Vlugt – Dagmar Neumann and their auction offered some insight into just how they had won the previous day. East opened 1 ♦, South overcalled 1 ♥ and West bid 2 ♥. Most of us might play this as asking for a stopper or as two-way i.e. either a stopper ask or a good raise in diamonds, to be revealed in due course. However, Maurits and Dagmar have the agreement that the cue bid unambiguously shows good support for opener's minor suit. Now although East showed a minimum hand, West bid 4 ♠ as Exclusion Keycard Blackwood and on learning that partner had two keycards outside spades but no queen of trumps, decided it was a "5 or 7" deal. Not being about to wimp out with 5 ♦, Maurits duly bid the grand slam and when trumps broke 2-2, it rolled home. They were, of course, the only pair out of 24 to reach this contract. Three pairs reached 6 ♦ while most languished in game, either in clubs or diamonds.

The deal associated with the second problem turned up in the crucial last round of the Teams event and helped to determine the outcome of several matches.

Board 24
Dealer W | Vul Nil

♠ A54
♥ AKQT4
♦ 64
♣ AK6

♠ 93
♥ 653
♦ QJT75
♣ 854



♠ KT2
♥ 982
♦ 92
♣ QJT72

♠ QJ876
♥ J7
♦ AK83
♣ 93

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	3	3	6	6	6
S	3	3	6	6	6
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

After partner's opening you have slam chances if you have a good spade fit, but probably not enough strength to force to slam otherwise. So it would be reasonable to start with 3 ♥ (transfer) and when partner rebids 3 ♠ (i.e. no super-accept) to simply bid 3NT and see whether partner converts this to 4 ♠, thus promising 3-card support.

Partner, who is concerned about the worthless doubleton diamond, does indeed convert. Now you should need no further excuse to roll out Roman Keycard Blackwood and arrive in the slam. Across the field there were 8 in 6 ♠ and 3 optimists in 6NT, which was also unbeatable. Definitely a weekend for the slam-happy bridge player! ♠