Playing with Robots

Part XLIX

By pluckycat

In a continuing endeavor to learn what I can from those who do particularly well playing against robots, this week, I turn to the bidding and play of Fred Chang, the person who won the Spring 2021 NAOBC Individual Robot Tournament championship with an overall 70.35% score—and scored 73.58% in the last session. We'll analyze six hands from that last session in which Chang scored over 97% on five hands and nearly 90% on a sixth hand.

It's worth noting that an analysis of the 24 boards reveals that Chang is an aggressive bidder. He backed his aggressiveness with great play; his outstanding results generally occurred from his stellar play of the cards against the robots. He doesn't engage in the idiosyncratic bidding of a Leo LaSota, leftfoot or usla. Most of the time, he makes the bids you and I would make. Indeed, many others reached the same contracts he did but, with great regularity, he garnered one and usually several more tricks than almost all of them. Let's look at a sampling of hands that are not atypical of Chang's performance.

In this article, so it is easiest to follow Chang's play of the hand, I will first provide a screenshot of the full deal. To test yourself against Chang, I've provided the opening lead for each hand and you can cover the East-West hands.

Board 2

Chang received the ♦2 lead. Plan the play.

Before we start with the play, please note that Chang had no compunction about doubling with 12HCP, vulnerable. He clearly believes in my mantra that, when at all reasonable to do so, you want to play the hand and not let the robots play. On the opening lead, West played the ♦K and Chang won with the ♦A. He then played the ♥K and ♥A, eschewing the finesse, no doubt because of West's 1NT bid (isn't it great that you can trust the robots' bidding). Then he played the ♦7, helpfully covered by the ♦9 by West, ♦10 and ♦Q. A low club was led back by East, but now Chang was in control. He won with the ♣A in hand, a low diamond to the board, another diamond,

pitching a club, ruff a club in hand, and a low spade. East was helpless to prevent Chang from winning the rest of the tricks after East took the ♠A—taking 10 tricks for 170 and 100%. A lot of players made eight or nine tricks after the same lead. Although it seems straightforward when viewing it now, no one found the same sequence of plays.

Board 3

	N North	W	N	E	S
3	♠ QJ954				1♠
D	♥ 83	P	1♠	2♥	X
	♦ 54	3♥	3♠	P	4♠
	♣ KJ43	P	P	P	

W West		E East
♠ A8732		♠ —
♥ K1065		♥ QJ9742
♦ 1073		♦ KJ92
♣ 10		♣ Q52

S South	
♠ K106	
♥ A	
♦ AQ86	
♣ A9876	4♠ N NS: 0 EW: 0

Here 36 of 38 players in Chang's cohort reached a spade contract. However, he was the only one to make 12 tricks after bidding game. He received 97.30% (someone was doubled in 3♠, making three). See if you can match him after receiving the ♥Q lead.

Chang won the ♥A. He played the ♠K, ducked by West, finding out the bad news of the 5-0 spade split. He played another spade, taken by West with the ♠A. Another spade by West, clearing the dummy of spades. Chang won in hand. Now Chang cashed another spade. And then he took the diamond finesse successfully, then a club to his hand, drew the last trump and had the rest of the tricks. Others tried to maneuver a heart ruff in dummy, but then didn't have enough entries back and forth and ran afoul of the 3-1 club break. Others played on clubs early and ran afoul of the same break. Nearly half the cohort went down in 4♠, while Chang made 12 tricks.

Board 5

	N North	W	N	E	S
5	♠ J62		P	2♦	3♠
D	♥ A74	P	4♠	P	P
	♦ 632	P			
	♣ A864				

W West		E East
♠ 1094		♠ 5
♥ KJ1032		♥ 985
♦ 4		♦ KQJ1075
♣ K972		♣ J103

S South	
♠ AKQ873	
♥ Q6	
♦ A98	
♣ Q5	4♠ S NS: 0 EW: 0

Here Chang was only somewhat aggressive with his 3♠ overcall, showing 19+ total points, but again he backed up his bidding with his play. In 4♠, along with 34 of the 38 players in his cohort, he received the ♦K lead. Plan the play.

Chang took the ♦A. Took two top spades, then played a diamond. East took his ♦Q and ♦J, west discarding a heart on the ♦J. East then led a heart, ducked to the ♥A by Chang. Now he played the ♠J overtaken by the ♠A and ran three more spades leaving a three-card ending, which he read correctly when West left itself with the ♥KJ and ♣K. Chang played a club to the ♣A and club back to the ♣Q. Making four. Only 3 of 34 made 4♠ by stripping the hand as Chang did and setting up the squeeze or end play. Chang received 97.30%.

Board 8

	N	Robot		W	N	E	S
D	8			P	P	1♥	P
		♠ K87		1♠	2♣	2♦	2♥
		♥ 8		P	3♣	P	P
		♦ J842		P			
		♣ AJ1095					

W	Robot		E	Robot
♠ A10653			♠ 94	
♥ 10			♥ AQ975	
♦ A96			♦ KQ1073	
♣ 6432			♣ 7	

S	fchang
♠ QJ2
♥ KJ6432
♦ 5
♣ KQ8

3♣ N   NS: 0 EW: 0

Here, Chang's bidding made a significant difference. His 2♥ bid showed three clubs and 11-16 total points. 31 of the 39 in his cohort bid 3♣ instead of 2♥, showing 7-11 total points and 3+♣. The club bidders were doubled (the robots clearly smelled weakness and the route to a successful defense) and received a club lead and could not maneuver more than one diamond ruff and went down one or more doubled. After having shown more strength, Chang received a ♦K lead. Then after East retained the lead and led a club, Chang won in hand and led a heart to set up a cross ruff. The heart was taken by East with the ♥A. East then led a spade, ducked by West and taken with the ♠K in hand. (It does West no good to rise with the ♠A and lead back a club because now Chang had spade entries to dummy.) Now Chang ruffed a diamond, played a low heart, ruffed in hand and then he ruffed another diamond. Next the ♥K was ruffed and overruffed. Now Chang had two spade tricks, five clubs in hand and two club ruffs in dummy for nine tricks. Chang was one of two to make 3♣ for 98.65%.

Board 9

	N	Robot		W	N	E	S
D	9				1♠	P	2NT
		♠ 109876		P	3♦	P	4♠
		♥ AK732		P	P	P	
		♦					
		♣ A32					

W	Robot		E	Robot
♠ 42			♠ K5	
♥ 109854			♥ J6	
♦ K10			♦ A98643	
♣ K1096			♣ QJ7	

S	fchang
♠ AQJ3
♥ Q
♦ QJ752
♣ 854

4♠ N   NS: 0 EW: 0

Here, Chang employed Jacoby 2NT to reach the 4♠ contract. About a third of the cohort bid 4♠ over 1♠ and received a different lead than those bidding Jacoby. I have often found that robot play seems to reward you for making the right bid. Here, a Jacoby bid kept alive the possibility of a slam, while a leap to 4♠ did not. Indeed, one intrepid soul bid slam here and was rewarded with 100% for his effort. Chang received the ♦A lead and those who went directly to 4♠ received the ♥J lead, making the hand far more difficult. Chang made all the tricks. Plan the play to do the same.

In essence, the hand is a straightforward dummy reversal. Chang ruffed the ♦A in hand, led to the ♥Q in dummy, and ruffed another low diamond, felling the ♦K in West. Next, a spade was led, taking the finesse, ruff another diamond, and another spade to the ♠A in dummy. Now, dummy's diamonds were good and the clubs went on the ♥AK, with the ♣A as an entry to hand. Only eight made all the tricks for 87.5% for Chang. Others who received the ♦A lead, then played a diamond honor from dummy, so they had to lose a diamond or a club at the end. Those receiving a heart lead couldn't ruff enough diamonds to establish them without the loss of at least one trick.

Board 13

Here again, how you bid to get to 3NT made a significant difference. You will note Chang's bid of 2♠. It had the effect of deterring a spade lead. 29 of 37 in the cohort on this hand bid 3NT. Only three bid spades on the way. None of the three received a spade lead. All who did not bid spades received a spade lead. Chang made 12 tricks after receiving a diamond lead, upon which East played the ♦K. Can you?

Chang rattled off four diamonds, played a club over to the ♣K on the board. Cashed the ♥AK, pitching spades, then took the losing finesse in clubs. West only had a club or a spade to return. One person made all 13 tricks because he got North to be declarer after bidding all three suits in response to North's heart bids. East then led the ♣10 covered by the ♣J and West's ♣Q, taken by the ♣K. Now declarer had six clubs, four diamonds (because he had an entry for a repeated diamond finesse), two hearts and one spade. Those who received spade leads from West generally didn't make the contract, going down one or two. Chang received 97.22% for being the only one to make 12 tricks.

What did I learn from Fred Chang's play? That he is a superb card player and a thoughtful bidder, worthy of emulation if only I was nearly as skillful; that he knows when to take risks with robots and plays accordingly; that being aggressive pays if you can back it up with your card play; that he has an uncanny ability to recognize and take advantage of the play problems robot play creates; that he knows that certain bids will likely affect how the robots defend and almost invariably makes the optimum ones.

I should note that there were many hands where Chang scored in the 70 and 80 percent range. On only two hands in 24 did he score below average. One, on which he made a 1NT bid with ♥ AKQJx and a King and a Jack in other suits, didn't work out well. Chang didn't open two other 14HCP hands 1NT. On the one other hand he did poorly on, he must have had a lapse in concentration because he uncharacteristically misplayed a 3NT hand to go down one and get a zero. It showed me that he is human and not a robot himself. Nonetheless, he did score 73.58%, which shows just how well he played in the last round and for the entire tournament.

That's it for this week. Stay safe and healthy and see you next week.