

Playing with Robots

Part XLVIII

By pluckycat

Last week, we looked at 12 hands bid and played by Leo LaSota, the Ace, in the Spring 2021 NAOBC Individual Robot Tournament that was held on March 6, 7 and 8, and LaSota's play in the second round of the tournament. LaSota scored a phenomenal 78.69% over 24 boards. On his top 12 boards in the round, as we saw, he made a number of unorthodox bids, particularly opening 1NT on 13HCP hands, even off-shape hands. The question I continually ask myself is, do you need to adopt the seemingly unorthodox methods of a Leo LaSota, an usla, or a leftfoot to get to the top rung of those who play with robots? Their methods work for them. LaSota finished ninth, averaging 67.39% and leftfoot finished fifth overall, averaging 68.13.

So, this week we'll analyze four boards in the second and third round that came between me and coming very close to matching the leftfoots and LaSotas. It strengthened my belief that you can do nearly as well as they do with conventional methods, which to be sure, with robots, involve opening 1NT with most 14HCP hands. These boards, for the most part, represent a loss of focus on my part. Despite my vow to do so, I didn't take a break during any of the sessions. I felt good and alert. The mind can be a deceptive instrument. Two of the bad boards came late in round three. Let's see if you can do better.

Let's start with the very last hand of the tournament, Board 24 on day three.

Both nonvulnerable, in fourth seat, after a 1♦ opening in first seat followed by two passes, I found myself with ♠AKQ2 ♥AQ4 ♦A42 ♣Q43. I doubled. 2♣ was bid by opener, pass by my partner, and 2♦ by East. I was not selling out to 2♦, so I bid 2NT. Passed out. Dummy came down with ♠J8753 ♥952 ♦63 ♣J75. The ♦Q was led. Plan the play.

I ducked the first diamond; ♦J next, also ducked. Now West switched to the ♣K. Then back to the ♦10, which East overtook with the ♦K and I won with the ♦A, pitching a heart from dummy. I then rattled off five spade tricks ending in dummy. West showed up with a singleton spade and pitched two hearts and two clubs on the spades. East pitched two clubs. What next?

It was likely that West started with five diamonds, four clubs, three hearts and a spade. Further it appeared he needed the ♥K for his opening bid and certainly for his subsequent bid. He almost certainly had two diamonds and ♣A left, with a singleton heart. Everything screamed to play a heart to the ♥A. I know this, but for some unfathomable reason—other than it being the last board of the last day—I took the finesse in hearts and, of course, lost to the bare ♥K. I turned a near top for making 2NT into a near bottom by going down two. The second worst board of the tournament. Almost before the ♥Q hit the board in cyberspace, the word "idiot" was the most polite thing I said to myself.

The full deal:

24	N North	W	N	E	S
	♠ J8753	1♠	P	P	X
	♥ 952	2♣	P	2♠	2NT
	♦ 63	P	P	P	
♣ J75					
W West		E East			
♠ 9		♠ 1064			
♥ K87		♥ J1063			
♦ QJ1097		♦ K85			
♣ AK102		♣ 986			
	S South				
	♠ AKQ2				
	♥ AQ4				
	♦ A42				
	♣ Q43				
		2NT S			NS: 0 EW: 0

On Board 17 of the last round, 34 of the 37 players in my cohort were in 4♠. North was declarer and held ♠Q1083 ♥76 ♦A74 ♣AK43. I had ♠KJ52 ♥KQ854 ♦Q2 ♣QJ. A low club was led. I won with the ♣Q in dummy and led a low spade, ducked by West, to the ♠10 in hand. East discarded a low diamond revealing the 5-0 trump break. Plan the play.

I played a low heart to the ♥Q, taken by the ♥A. West played ♠A and another spade, which I won with the ♠J in dummy. What now?

Here's where I really fell from grace. I played the ♣J, then a diamond to the ♦A, then the ♣A pitching the ♦Q. But West ruffed the ♣A, and played a spade and I was stuck in my hand with only the ♥K to take for down three. Far better would have been to have played the ♥Q and another heart, ruffed in hand with the ♠Q and now play a low club to the ♣J in dummy. Now the good ♥8, ruffed by West. And West would have had to return a diamond to avoid allowing me to make the contract. I'd have lost only a heart and three spades. There was a 70% spread between down one and down three. Again, just a lack of focus. Three of 38 held it to down one, 14 were down two, 17 were down three and three didn't bid game.

The full deal:

17	N North	W	N	E	S
	♠ Q1083	1♠	P	P	1♥
	♥ 76	P	1♠	P	4♠
	♦ A74	P	P	P	
♣ AK43					
W West		E East			
♠ A9764		♠			
♥ AJ2		♥ 1093			
♦ J65		♦ K10983			
♣ 98		♣ 107652			
	S South				
	♠ KJ52				
	♥ KQ854				
	♦ Q2				
	♣ QJ				
		4♠ N			NS: 0 EW: 0

The next deal again showed a lack of focus and concentration. And it was costly. Here's the full deal:

6	N North	W N E S
	♠ J1096 ♥ 7 ♦ Q72 ♣ K10642	P P 1♥ 1NT P P 2♠ 3♦ P P P
W West	E East	
♠ 42 ♥ 82 ♦ J964 ♣ QJ975	♠ AQ853 ♥ KQ9643 ♦ 3 ♣ A	
	S South	
	♠ K7 ♥ AJ105 ♦ AK1085 ♣ 83	3♦ S NS: 0 EW: 0

I overcalled 1NT and then, when East bid 2♠, no way was I going to allow it to play there. Nor was anyone else. Everyone bid over 2♠ except the lone soul who passed 1♥ for a dreadful score. 22 of the 37 in the cohort played in 3♦, some doubled. Seven made three, 11 went down one and four of us managed to go down two. Going down two, in hindsight, was criminal, given the bidding and early play. And costly. The ♥8 was led and there are lots of ways to maneuver to lose only four tricks and make the contract. Plan your play. You can't do worse than I did.

After the heart lead, I won the ♥A capturing East's ♥Q. Then—first mistake—I cashed the ♦A. I then ruffed a heart and led a spade off the board. The ♠A was won by East, who then a low spade, which I won with the ♠K. I could still make this hand if I did the right thing. But, of course, this hand wouldn't be here if I had. I led a low club instead of a heart and compounded the error by putting up the ♣K, losing to the singleton ♣A. Now I was down one for sure and I managed to continue to misplay the hand, when I let my disgust with the ♣K losing to the ♣A overcome all sensibility. East played the ♠Q and then the ♠8, which I ruffed, for some unfathomable reason, even though I had the good ♠10 in dummy. I was overruffed by West and eventually went down two.

These three boards cost me more than 7% overall, turning what would have been a nearly 67% game into a 59.29% game in the last round. Inattention on one board in the second round cost me dearly.

Halfway through the round, on board 12, I was dealt ♠KQ104 ♥J6542 ♦K5 ♣K8. The bidding went 1♦-P-1NT-? What to bid?

The choices seemed clear: Pass; or 2♦, which is Michaels, showing 5+ in each major and 9+ HCP; or 2♥, which shows rebiddable hearts and 13-18 total points; or double, showing 13+ total points. Which would you choose? Pass was the popular choice by more than half the cohort. But those who scored best bid 2♦. 2♥ worked, and even double worked if you corrected responder's 2♣ to 2♥. If you ended in 2♥, you were doubled, but more made it than went down one. Well, I doubled and then decided to pass the 2♣ bid by my bot—even after it was doubled. I know better. It is usually best to go back to your best suit. The bots rarely, in these circumstances, have what you will need. All other doublers bid 2♥. I got what I deserved, my only zero among 72 boards.

The full deal:

12	N North	W	N	E	S
	♠ J2 ♥ 109 ♦ A1093 ♣ Q9643	1+ P 1NT X P 2♣ X P P P			
W West		E East			
♠ A865 ♥ Q83 ♦ Q874 ♣ A2		♠ 973 ♥ AK7 ♦ J62 ♣ J1075			
	S South				
	♠ KQ104 ♥ J6542 ♦ K5 ♣ K8				2♣ N NS: 0 EW: 0

2♣ was doomed from the start—unless the bots were in an extremely generous mood. They weren't. The ♥K was led by East followed by the ♣J. I covered with the ♣K, taken by West with the ♣A. Now a low diamond was led by West taken by my ♦K in hand. What would you play next? Well, double dummy (more about that in a moment), I needed to play a heart. Going down one doubled was, however, only worth 4% instead of a zero. I, of course, didn't play a heart, but rather played a spade to the ♠J and now there was no way of avoid losing seven tricks, for down two.

Before I get to a few takeaways for the National tournament, I should comment on the double dummy aspect of BBO. I probably haven't paid enough attention to this device. It's a terrific teaching tool if you haven't been using it. When you go to the movie of a hand, simply click **GIB** to show double dummy. When you're looking at a hand in history, click the three bars at the top right-hand corner of the screen and click **Show double dummy**. At the start of the hand and after each card is played, you can see what the result would be double dummy, depending on what cards are played next. If there's a number in red, that means the contract will be down that many tricks, whatever the number shows. A number in black represents overtricks depending on what cards are played. An "=" sign represents the contract making. The double dummy device, is, of course, available for all games, including your pairs games. It's a handy device to avoid wondering if you could have or should have made that contract.

Back to me and the Nationals. I should emphasize that during this entire tournament, I didn't have the courage to adopt LaSota's or leftfoot's methods even on one hand—not enough road testing by me in less stressful environments. And, to be sure, there is the element of luck. On the third day, when LaSota didn't do that well (certainly, by his standards, a 58% game is worse than mediocre), on one hand, he opened 1NT with a 15 count and a five-card heart suit. Passed out. He tied for bottom when the defense ran off eight tricks. Those who opened a heart scored tops or near tops. There were several hands on which I had the choice between a finesse and a 3-3 break with no indication if the finesse would work. Most, along with me, tried the finesse. It worked, sometimes. Also, the four hands I reviewed here are, of course, not the only hands I made mistakes on. The others were just less costly.

Bottom line: if I could find a way to keep focus, keep counting and keep paying attention to discards and spot cards, I would like to think, on my good days, that I can compete with the LaSota's or leftfoot's. If I played and bid the four boards analyzed in this article as well as I should have, my overall score would have been in the 66% range, good enough for a top-15 placement. I wish I knew

how to maintain that focus every hand and every card. If you have ideas, please, please let me know. Hope springs eternal that improvement lies around some corner. But the thought does occur, am I just a minor league Ahab in vain pursuit of an unattainable goal?

Until then the struggle continues. Keep safe, keep healthy and get vaccinated. See you next week.