

Playing with Robots

Part XIX

By pluckycat

Last week, we looked at the first four hands from a free Just Declare daylong contest with almost 14,000 participants. We particularly looked at the advice given by Peter Hollands, an Australian expert, about the inferences to be drawn from robots' leads and play on defense. Did you look at his video? If you play at all with robots, it's worth your time. This week, we'll look at the remaining four hands of the eight-hand set and see what those hands have to teach us. Can we do better—or at least maintain the 74.6% achieved on the first four hands?

Board 5 lands you in 6♠ with no adverse bidding. Your hand is ♠AKQJ ♥AK743 ♦AQ6 ♣A.

Dummy is ♠97632 ♥62 ♦954 ♣K102.

West leads the ♣7 to North's ♣2, and East's ♣Q. I take my singleton ♣A and cash a high spade to discover—not at all to my surprise—that West has four spades. Otherwise, there's no problem to the hand. Plan the play.

The hope is that hearts are 3-3 and that the ♣K will provide a discard for a diamond. I have only one entry to dummy, so the play to dummy to cash the ♣K seems routine: Draw trump. Cash the ♥A and ♥K. Ruff a heart and, okay, the hearts are 3-3. Now in dummy, cash the ♣K and discard a diamond. Now what?

Do you take the diamond finesse? You, of course, are preciously aware that if you do, and it doesn't succeed, you're down one, never a good thing in a freely bid contract in a Just Declare session. Let's start with West's known distribution. It led the ♣7. It has followed to four spades, three hearts, and two clubs, playing the ♣8 on the ♣K. East meanwhile discarded three small clubs and a diamond on the four spades and followed with another small club on the ♣K. It appears likely that West has at least three clubs and probably four, which leaves room for, most likely, two diamonds. The odds appear to be 5-2, at worst 4-3, that East has the ♦K. So naturally, I suspect a trap and eschew the finesse. Wrong! For several reasons. Generally, in robot play, you're rewarded for doing the right thing, e.g., not taking a finesse if there's a good alternative, ducking when there may be some advantage or there's the possibility of inducing a favorable switch, or just playing the appropriate percentages. Also, late-in-the-hand finesses seem to me to usually work, particularly if you need them to make the hand; early in the hand, finesses are unlikely to work because robots typically don't lead away from honors.

Anyway, the diamond finesse worked. Those who took it made 7 and scored 90.38%. Just 34 players did that. 128 players, like me, made only 6 for 45.83%. 19 benighted souls somehow went down in 6♠ for a single-digit percentage. Another good opportunity to score high lost.

The full deal:

5	N North	W	N	E	S
	♠ 97632 ♥ 62 ♦ 954 ♣ K102	P	P	P	2♣
W West	E East	P	2♠	P	2♥
♠ 10854 ♥ QJ8 ♦ 87 ♣ J987	♠ ♥ 1095 ♦ KJ1032 ♣ Q6543	P	3♣	P	3♠
S South	P	4♠	P	P	6♠
♠ AKQJ ♥ AK743 ♦ AQ6 ♣ A	♠ S				
					NS: 0 EW: 0

Board 6 puts you in a sacrifice at 5♣x after this bidding:

W	N	E	S
		1♥	P
4♦	P	4♥	P
P	4NT	P	5♣
P	P	X	P
P	P		

Your hand is ♠J8743 ♥KQ ♦753 ♣Q107. Dummy is ♠9 ♥8 ♦QJ9864 ♣AK952.

West leads the ♦10 to the ♦K. East then takes the ♥A and leads a low diamond, which is ruffed. West then takes a high spade trick and leads back another heart. I've lost 4 tricks and am sure to lose another diamond. Can I hold it to down three? Plan the play.

It seems really straightforward. Test trump and see if they're 3-2. If they are, simply establish the diamonds after giving up a trick. Dummy will be good. Nonetheless, I receive 67.86% for going down three, along with 126 other folks in this top cohort. It was amazing to me that 70 folks went down four or more. The movies reveal that most didn't draw trump and establish diamonds, but instead tried to ruff out spades in dummy. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that some folks get fixated on establishing their hand as declarer and forget to consider establishing dummy. It's why dummy reversals are so often overlooked.

The full deal:

6	N North	W N E S
	♠ 9	4+ P 1v P
	♥ 8	P 4NT P 5♠
	♦ QJ9864	P P X P
♣ AK952		
W West	E East	
♠ AKQ53	♠ 106	
♥ 97642	♥ AJ1053	
♦ 10	♦ AK2	
♣ 83	♣ J64	
	S South	
	♠ J8742	
	♥ KQ	
	♦ 753	
	♣ Q107	
	5♣ S NS: 0 EW: 0	

Board 7 is like Board 5—another tester of your nerves. You land in 3NT with no adverse bidding.

Your hand is ♠J107 ♥QJ6 ♦832 ♣A432. Dummy is ♠A ♥AK10 ♦K10974 ♣KJ106. The ♠5 is led. Plan your play.

You have three heart tricks, four clubs—if you can find the queen—and a spade. If the ♦K is onside then you have a ninth trick. But can you get your nine tricks before the defense takes its five? How would you play it?

Well, after taking the ♠A, I immediately played the ♣J, which East covered with the ♣Q. (Remember robots like to cover honors even when they shouldn't.) Okay, so now I have four club tricks. What to do next? I took my club tricks, hoping for some helpful discards, but no spades were discarded. So, I took my three hearts and then led up to the ♦K. But I couldn't outsmart the robots. West rose with the ♦A and underled his spade honor. Ultimately, the robots cashed four spades for down one. I was joined by 158 others for 56.82%. One person out of 185 in this cohort made 3NT for 100%. That person did so legitimately. Can you see how he did it?

The full deal:

7	N North	W N E S
	♠ A	P 1+ P 1NT
	♥ AK10	P 3♠ P 3+
	♦ K10974	P 3v P 3NT
♣ KJ106		
W West	E East	
♠ Q9853	♠ K642	
♥ 832	♥ 9754	
♦ A65	♦ QJ	
♣ 95	♣ Q87	
	S South	
	♠ J107	
	♥ QJ6	
	♦ 832	
	♣ A432	
	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0	

The person who made 3NT played the same way I did in clubs and then led a diamond, risking the possibility that the ♦A could be on his right over the ♦K in East. If so, he'd lose multiple diamonds as well as multiple spades. But there was no good reason for the robot sitting West to rise with the ♦A early in the play of the hand. The robot didn't know the spade situation or that declarer could run nine tricks if it ducked. So, fortune favored the brave again. Here a 50-50

chance paid huge dividends. It's noteworthy that 25 folks took the club finesse the wrong way and went down two or more for the result they deserved—a single digit percentage. Why not try to see if East will cover in clubs?

Board 8. Now, I'm frustrated at not keeping up my pace on the first four boards. So, rather than just playing normally, I wanted to outsmart the robots. Dumb and dumber. Let me show you. Your hand is ♠AQ1072 ♥Q876 ♦KJ2 ♣K. Dummy is ♠J63 ♥AK52 ♦Q964 ♣QJ.

You're in 4♠ with no adverse bidding. You receive the ♥J lead. Plan the play.

Most people took the ♥J with the ♥A, as I did, and then led the ♠J, covered by the ♠K. Two more rounds of trump drew the outstanding trump. Now, I led the ♣K—ducked by East !?! I guess, from East's perspective, it's hard to believe that a singleton king was led. I then led the ♦K to the ♦A, taken by East. East led the ♣A, which I ruffed. Aha. My brain went into overdrive. This can't be that easy. The hearts must be 4-1 and I'm going to need a heart pitch. The diamonds won't be 3-3 either. So, as I said, dumb and dumber, I took the diamond finesse at this point—against the 10. East had the 10 and I made only 5♠. The hearts were 3-2 and all I needed to do was cash one more heart and claim 6. Last board blues. Making 6 was worth 87.58%. Making 5, as I did, was worth 43.14%. 39 of 154 made 6. 97 of 154 made 5. Apparently, those other 96 did something like leading the ♣Q from dummy, where it was covered, rather than leading the ♣K from hand. Should have made no difference, but apparently it did. Who can fully comprehend the mind of robots? How 18 people made only 4 or went down also mystifies me. Again, lots of beginners had to have played. No good excuse for making only five, let alone fewer.

The full deal:

Board 8	N North	W N E S
	♠ J63 ♥ AK52 ♦ Q964 ♣ QJ	P 1♥ P 1♠ P 1NT P 2♣ P 2♦ P 4♣ P P P
W West	E East	
♠ 954 ♥ J3 ♦ 83 ♣ 1085432	♠ K8 ♥ 1094 ♦ A1075 ♣ A976	
S South		
♠ AQ1072 ♥ Q876 ♦ KJ2 ♣ K		4♠ S NS: 0 EW: 0

Two clear-cut and costly errors in the last four boards and one huge missed opportunity. I finished with 63.87% and 1139 out of 13963 (top 8%) persons playing in this free tournament. Not bad, but had I simply taken advantage of the easily available opportunities on boards 3 and 4 and not made mistakes on boards 5 and 8, I would have scored 79.00 %. Enough to place 5th overall. But maybe the lessons painfully learned and relearned about playing with robots will stick. Certainly, that's the hope.

Stay safe and healthy. See you next week.