

## Playing with Robots

### Part XXXIII

By pluckycat

Last week, I took you through my adventures and misadventures during the Saturday and Sunday sessions in the first two rounds of the Fall 2020 NABC Robot Individual, for which 3259 persons registered to play. For the first two rounds of 24 boards each, I averaged 64.86%. I was close to the top 1% of entrants and was hoping for a very high finish. Pride goeth before the fall. I promised I'd discuss what occurred in the third and final round on Monday, November 23. After playing, I was sorely tempted to renege on that promise. But I thought some of you may well be fans of horror shows and train wrecks. If so, welcome aboard. It will be a rough ride. After far too many hands, I kept asking, "What was I thinking?" The answer kept coming back, "You weren't." Nonetheless, let's try to see what can be learned from the experience.

The first four hands went reasonably well except that I failed to see that a suit was going to block and I needed to manage my entries better. I scored 55% on that hand instead of 85%, a sign of things to come. My declarer play for the 24 boards was far, far below standard. Nonetheless, as I learned afterwards in reviewing the results, I had still scored 67% on those four hands.

**Board 5** was even more a sign of things to come. I held ♠K3 ♥AJ3 ♦A108 ♣AQ1074 and opened 1♣, passed out. Dummy was ♠9542 ♥Q10654 ♦32 ♣J8. The ♠Q was led. Plan the play.

This hand requires a bit of analysis. Dummy has limited entries and developing hearts, if you can, seems the best prospect for success. You also don't want to lose control by getting forced in spades. But my singular focus was on insuring I got a diamond ruff in dummy. It could have worked out reasonably well, but it wasn't the best line of play. I won the spade lead with the ♠K. Then I ducked a diamond. The ♠J was led by West and then the ♠10 was led next, ruffed by me. Now I led the ♦A and the ♦10 and ruffed with the ♣8 in dummy. Next I played the ♥Q, covered by the ♥K and taken by my ♥A. I played a trump toward the ♣J, but West hopped up with the ♣K and played a diamond, which I had to ruff in hand. Clubs broke 4-2 so I had to lose two tricks at the end, making two clubs for 15%.

I should have ignored the diamond ruff and focused on how to give myself the best chance to utilize the hearts in dummy. I should have played the ♣10 at trick two. West will win with the ♣K, and return the ♣3 to the ♣J on the board. I would have been in full control and should then have led a low heart toward my hand. When the ♥K pops up, I can make five clubs, as many did who played the hand that way. I do love BBO for the ability, when playing with robots, to go to the movies after the round is complete and see how others played the hands more successfully. Most

people in the cohort of players with whom I competed were also in 1♣. Those making five scored 85%. I focused on the diamond ruff to the exclusion of the hand as a whole.

The full deal:

5	N North	W N E S
	♠ 9542 ♥ Q10654 ♦ 32 ♣ J8	P P P 1♠ P P P
W West	E East	
♠ QJ10 ♥ 9872 ♦ QJ54 ♣ K3	♠ A876 ♥ K ♦ K976 ♣ 9652	
	S South	
	♠ K3 ♥ AJ3 ♦ A108 ♣ AQ1074	1♠ S NS: 0 EW: 0

On the next hand, still pondering what I could have done better on the previous hand, I literally repeated the same error by focusing on a ruff instead of on the hand as a whole and where the opportunities and dangers were. Almost everyone was in 4♠s. My hand was ♠AKQ763 ♥AQ102 ♦8 ♣K10. Dummy was ♠2 ♥K4 ♦AJ1097 ♣Q8542. Plan the play after receiving the ♦2 lead.

Here, I focused on ruffing a heart with my singleton ♠2 in dummy (because I didn't expect the ♥J to come down). I planned on coming back to my hand with a diamond ruff and then drawing trump. I should have known better. With great frequency in tournament play, you'll face unfavorable distribution. You need to plan for that. I blithely didn't. I won the lead with my ♦A. Played the ♥K and a small heart. Uh-oh. It was ruffed by East and sure enough the ♦K came back. Still blind to the impending horror, I ruffed low, was overruffed, and back came a heart for another ruff by East. I ruffed East's lead of the ♦Q with my ♠Q to avert another opponent ruff. Because spades broke 3-3, I was down one—for 17%. Again, I ignored my own advice. I've repeatedly said in these articles that robots like to lead singletons. Here, the lead could well have been a singleton and I could have protected myself by immediately drawing trump. Doing so would have allowed me to make five for 54%. When the ♦K was led, I could have ruffed high and saved a trick. Making four scored 35%. A number of players in NT made five.

The full deal:

6	N North	W N E S
	♠ 2 ♥ K4 ♦ AJ1097 ♣ Q8542	P 1NT P 1♠ P 3NT P 3♥ P P P 4♠
W West	E East	
♠ J94 ♥ J98753 ♦ 2 ♣ J76	♠ 1085 ♥ 6 ♦ KQ6543 ♣ A93	
	S South	
	♠ AKQ763 ♥ AQ102 ♦ 8 ♣ K10	4♠ S NS: 0 EW: 0

On board 9, I again failed to go after trump early when I should have and went down one for 25% when, if I had drawn trump, I would have made six for 92%. Now, I was really down on myself. Had I had enough sense, I would have walked away and come back with, hopefully, renewed focus. I kept thinking about the plays I didn't make. One of the bad things about BBO for me is that it allows me to repeatedly look at previous hands. But instead of walking away and trying to find the fellow who played the first two rounds, I plowed on. And, of course, at the time, I thought I was doing far worse than I actually was. The next several boards seemed mediocre, but nonetheless, after 13 boards, upon later review, I found that I was at 55%, still plenty of time to have gotten to 60% (my goal), if not higher. This is a lesson I must repeatedly learn—not to get down because of a few poor results. Play each board as if it's the only board that matters.

On board 14, I had a bad board due to a choice to open 1NT with a singleton Ace, which in robot play has often worked out well for me. I had ♠AK95 ♥A ♦A96 ♣Q10864. I opened 1NT, both nonvulnerable, in second seat. LHO bid 2♣, Cappelletti, showing a single suited hand. My bot partner doubled, which was Stayman. Okay, I thought. I have an easy 2♠ bid. All pass.

Turned out to be a disaster. If I had opened 1♣, as most of the field did, West would have preempted 3♥, been doubled by my bot partner, and gone down three with good defense. I would have scored 79%. As it was, I butchered the hand in 2♠, going down one, when I again chose to be impervious to the likely adverse distribution signaled by the Cappelletti bid. I scored 4%. However, making 2♠ would have only yielded 27%.

The full deal:

14	N Robot	W N E S
	♠ 1087 ♥ 853 ♦ K875 ♣ AJ9	2♣ X 1NT P P P 2♠
W Robot	E Robot	
♠ 3 ♥ KJ109762 ♦ 4 ♣ K532	♠ QJ642 ♥ Q4 ♦ QJ1032 ♣ 7	
S pluckycat		
♠ AK95 ♥ A ♦ A96 ♣ Q10864		2♠ S NS: 0 EW: 0

I should note that a couple of players scored above average when they opened the hand 1NT, had the same auction I did up to dummy's double, but then continued to 3NT. Also noteworthy is that my dummy bot bid Stayman here with 3-3 in the majors. That can often happen in robot play where the bot has the points to bid, but no other good bid in such a sequence. It then has the minimum of what clicking on its bid promised.

Two boards later, I missed a slam that almost everyone else bid when I decided to try to turn the tide by bidding conservatively. Wrong decision again. I got 18% instead of 55%.

On other boards, I'd done reasonably well, so after 17 boards (I found out later), I was still at 53%. But it felt far worse to me at the time, so I continued going against the grain—as with the hand on which I failed to bid the slam—rather than playing normally.

On board 18, when the vast majority of us were defending 2♠, I made a risky lead away from KJxx, hoping to strike gold. I ended up with dross, allowing declarer to make two extra tricks for 9% instead of getting 63% for holding declarer to three.

On the next hand, in a 4♠ contract that virtually the entire field was in, I made a no-win play by discarding instead of ruffing high and went down one, scoring 25% instead of 85%.

On board 20, fourth hand after three passes, both vulnerable, I opened a normal 1NT with ♠AKQ6 ♥42 ♦A85 ♣Q854. Two passes and then RHO bid 2♣, Cappelletti. I passed, LHO bid an obligatory 2♦, my bot bid 2♥, showing 4+♥, 8- HCP, 5-9 total points.

What do you do now? When I and 40% of the field faced this situation, we passed. 20% of the field went on to bid 2♠. They were right, I was wrong.

The full deal:

D 20	N North	W N E S
	♠ 8532	P P P 1NT
	♥ KQ85	P P 2♣ P
	♦ J	2♦ 2♥ P P
♣ 10976	P	
W West	E East	
♠ J94	♠ 107	
♥ J1096	♥ A73	
♦ 92	♦ KQ107643	
♣ AK32	♣ J	
S South		
♠ AKQ6		
♥ 42		
♦ A85		
♣ Q854		
	2♥ N	NS: 0 EW: 0

As you can see, dummy had four hearts. Had I thought this through, and not indulged in hoping that dummy would have five hearts and my top spades would all take tricks, the safer course would have been to bid 2♠. I went down two for 40%. 2♠ made for 91%.

After two mediocre boards on 21 and 22, my round, like all bad horror movies, ended on a particularly low note on the last two boards. Let's see if you can do better.

On board 23, you have ♠KJ97543 ♥A65 ♦K ♣K10. In first seat, both vulnerable, you open 1♠. The bidding proceeds:

W	N	E	S
			1♠
P	3♣	P	3♠
P	4♦	P	?

Your bot partner's bids show 6+♣, 4+♦, 3-♥, 2-♠, 11-HCP, 11+ Total points.

What do you do now?

You may have noticed I've been deferring to my bot partner. That's often not a good thing to do because that bot may have the minimum of what it promises, as we've seen all too often in this round. Anyway, I bid 5♣ instead of persisting with 4♠. You guessed it. Wrong again. 5♣ goes down one for 17%, while 4♠ makes five for 82%.

The full deal: (Board 23)

23	N North	W West	E East	S South
	♠ 6 ♥ J2 ♦ AQ62 ♣ A65432	♠ 102 ♥ K1074 ♦ J10983 ♣ J8	♠ AQ8 ♥ Q983 ♦ 754 ♣ Q97	♠ KJ97543 ♥ A65 ♦ K ♣ K10
				5♠ N NS: 0 EW: 0

Finally, we arrive at the last board. Some rounds you just can't wait for them to end. This is one of those. But it presents yet another challenge. Let's see if you're up to it. I certainly wasn't.

You're in fourth seat, both nonvulnerable, and RHO opens 1♥. You hold ♠10853 ♥A4 ♦98 ♣AK532. What do you do?

Well, if you bid 2♣, your bot opponents stopped in 3♥. But if you passed, as I did, they carried on to 4♥. Most folks bid 2♣ and scored either 86%, when their opponents made four for 170, or 53%, when their opponents made five for 200. I scored 12% when my opponents, who were in game, made 5 for 450. A fitting end.

In the third round, I scored an abysmal 45.50%, which together with my first two rounds, combined to give me 58.80%, just out of the top 10%. If I'd played just half decently, as I had in the first two rounds, I easily would have been in the top 1%. Opportunity squandered.

Lots of lessons though. The round was a constant reminder that the boards are designed to present challenges with frequent adverse distribution. Ignore the risks at your peril. Secondly, don't take a rosy view of what your bot promises you. It pays to be conservative in your bidding generally and don't push in a competitive auction (as you might with humans) when you can leave it to your bot to bid if it has the goods. Perhaps more important than any technical awareness is a disciplined ability to focus on each hand without the scars and lacerations inflicted by previous hands. It's far too easy on BBO to look at the previous hand and replay it and replay it. I'm reminded, in another context, of the words of golf legend Ben Hogan who famously said, "The only shot that matters is the next one." My daughter's youth soccer coach used to yell, "Cancel," after a botched play. Hogan's advice and that of the soccer coach are well worth remembering—certainly for me.

See you next week. In the meantime, stay safe and healthy.