

Playing with Robots

Part XIII

By pluckycat

In these articles, I've continually attempted to explore the highways and byways of BBO with an emphasis on playing with robots and seeing what we can learn about them and from them. So, this week is a potpourri of insights, adventures into new territories and revisiting the lessons learned from old favorites.

Let's start with my recent correspondence with usla. You may remember usla. His play is the subject of articles VII and VIII in this series. He's the Romanian who is a K on BBO, one of the top 30 BBO lifetime point winners. One of the neat things about BBO is that you can search for a BBO username and then write to that person via the chat function. I wrote to usla asking for tips about playing with robots and he was gracious enough to respond. I also wrote to another K (who was a former Ace until he stopped playing as much), but he has yet to respond. Here are the key points usla offered. Some of these you've heard from me, but as with so many lessons in bridge, it's good to have them repeated. His comments are numbered; my remarks on them follow his comments.

1. Robots don't like aggressive bids. They usually get you a bad result.

Boy, can I verify that in spades. Time after time when I've bid aggressively, the robots put me in contracts I don't want to be in. I've found that you shouldn't stretch with robots. Also, if they have the goods, after you've passed, the robots will bid on, both in competitive and non-competitive auctions.

2. It's usually not good to double a contract. Your robot partner will defend badly and the opponents will usually make their contract.

Time and again, this would have been good advice for me to follow. The distributions are such that the robots can and do make their doubled contracts and your robot partner almost invariably frustrates you with its leads and defense. Avoid the angst and don't double. Exceptions exist, but they're infrequent.

3. You should learn the robot's system, and learn it well.

It absolutely pays to invest some time in learning how the robots are programmed, particularly how they defend and lead. See Articles III, IV, and V for a primer.

4. Choose the optimal bid. If your bidding is accurate, the robots will often play badly and you'll achieve a good result.

Time and again, I've found this to be true. When you reach the optimal contract, the robots often will make a bad play that allows you to make it, even when you run into horrible distribution. It's almost as if they've been programmed to sympathize with your plight. So, don't give up against adverse distribution; your robot opponents may come through for you.

5. Robots make some unusual bids (no kidding!). A simple jump after partner's opening is strong.

I take this as a reminder to click the robot's bids and your own bids all the time. Don't take any of them, either yours or the robot's, for granted.

BBO Express - 4 Fast Boards

This is a new competition that BBO has devised. It consists of playing four boards for a dime. You get a partner, usually human, but not always - depending on the size of the field and another factor that I'll mention shortly. The boards are played in 6 minutes. Most noteworthy is that you get 30 seconds to bid and play. After 14 seconds have passed during a turn, the player gets a warning that he or she will be replaced by a robot in 16 seconds if they don't play. The one time my partner was replaced by a robot, I was delighted. Not surprisingly, the play is quick and you shouldn't leave the table if the clock says four minutes are left in the round. The round will often start early if everyone has finished. I've played four times now and the game has attracted between 20 and 30 players. For your dime, depending on the number of entrants, you can win up to .30 BBO points.

You can find these games by going to **Home**, then **Competitive**, then **BBO Points Tournaments**. Then scroll down until you find **Express - 4 Fast Boards** for \$.10. I've found the players are often foreign and they vary tremendously in talent. The same players seem to reappear. It's hard to beat the price.

Be prepared for disappointment and exhilaration, the usual good and bad of playing in an individual event. Four hands also means that one bad board really does ruin your game. In one instance, I was rolling along when my novice Italian male partner decided to trump my winner with the outstanding master trump and then proceed to put the declarer in dummy for three winning tricks she otherwise couldn't reach. Unbelievable, but sadly true. Another top was turned into a bottom and the preceding three boards trashed.

Nonetheless, for a quick fix (and I do mean quick - the game I played just before writing this was over in 17 minutes), these express games are worth a try. What do you have to lose?

One More Just Declare Hand

In a brief follow-up to last week's article about Just Declare games, I offer this hand. The bidding is:

N	E	S	W
P	P	1♠	2♦
3♦	P	3♠	P
3NT	P	4♠	All Pass

North

♠ A103

♥ 8543

♦ A

♣ Q9753

South

♠ J97542

♥ KQ97

♦ 106

♣ A

This hand appeared late in the round and after the ♣10 lead, I quickly assess. I have two likely heart losers and may even have three. I have at least one spade loser and may have two. I clearly need to ruff a diamond in dummy, so one issue, as it often is, is transportation. The ♣10 lead is suspicious. Remember robots like to lead singletons and here we know, after clicking on the bid, that West has 5+ ♦ for its bid. Going directly to the board to the ♦ A seems wrong. When I try to get back to my hand with a club ruff, West could have a singleton honor in spades and if the ♣10 is a singleton, I may incur two spade losers when I don't need to. After all that, I decide to lead a spade from hand. West helpfully plays the ♠Q which I take with the Ace and East plays the eight.

Okay now, I just need to get back to my hand. I lead a low club and remember to ruff with the 9♣ because the ♠Q and ♠6 are outstanding. West discards a diamond. I now ruff a diamond in dummy and hope to keep the hand to at most two heart losers. I play a heart and West shows up with the ♥A and ♥J, but the ♥10 is doubleton is to my right, so I do lose only two hearts. The East West hands:

West ♠KQ6 ♥AJ6 ♦QJ9873 ♣10

East ♠8 ♥102 ♦K542 ♣KJ8642

There were many ways to go wrong in this hand and not surprisingly most people found them. Only 4 of 33 in the cohort who played the hand made four. We received 95.31%. 26 people went down one for 48.44% and 3 went down three for 3.13%. Many, I'm sure, ruffed a club with a low spade only to be overruffed, or played the ♠A, hoping for a 2-2 split, or won the club lead and led a spade at trick two and won the ♠A, but tried to get to hand with a heart only to have West win the ♥A and play the ♠K and another spade to eliminate the diamond ruff. Late in the round, it's easy to get sloppy and not think through what you need to do safely.

I just wanted to note that, as I suspected, the scores of the robots playing in the HBC games is coming down. In a recent game, the bots scored just 50%. I'll try to analyze why next week. See you then.