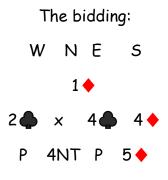# Playing with Robots

Part VIII

By pluckycat

For those of you who missed last week or would like to view any of the previous articles, they're all available on our website at [Useful Bridge Base Online (BBO) Instructions](). Scroll down to **Instructions: Playing with Robots, Parts 1–7**.

A few of you wrote me about last week's article and condemned usla's tactics. I think that's viewing them in the wrong spirit. I suspect that BBO uses algorithms to create the hands for its robot contests. Even I, a relative novice at robot play, have noticed distinct patterns. For instance, far too many hands in which Drury is bid by a passed hand result in makeable slams. Similarly, when vulnerable against not with a marginal hand, bidding is often at your peril. Players like usla have figured out these patterns far better than virtually anyone playing BBO, hence his status as a King. He's simply taking advantage of the artificial intelligence to play the game very successfully. My wife plays Mahjong online against three other robots (it too is a four-person game). She tells me (I know virtually nothing about Mahjong) that she's most successful when she doesn't take obvious routes to achieve Mahjong, but instead tries to be deceptive and confuse the robots by choosing a pattern they can't readily catch on to. Similarly, in the play of the hand, players like usla take advantage of patterns in the hands (e.g., rarely do obvious finesses work) to take extra tricks, but they also take full advantage of robots' card-playing proclivities. So, it's worth studying their tactics. Today, we'll look at several particularly instructive hands and highlight the lessons to be learned.

Playing with filixmas

I played in another 8-board BBO robot $0.39 session earlier this week. At the top of the leader board, with 81.61%, was filixmas, a Turkish expert. Not surprisingly, coming in fourth was our old friend usla at 80.61%. Interestingly, filixmas achieved his top ranking by getting consistently good scores, mostly in the 70s and 80s, with only one in the 90s, and a low of 68%. usla, in contrast, had an average board of

50% (flat, with everyone in the field making 5♠, a real rarity online) and a 7% board, in which he misjudged the hand's potential and ended in a minor suit slam, down three (proof that he's human and not a robot himself). But on the other six boards, he scored in the high 90s or 100% through his usual tactics and astute play of the cards.

First let's look at one of filixmas's best two hands. filixmas is South, both vulnerable.

The bidding:

W	N	E	S
			1♦
2♣	x	4♣	4♦
P	4NT	P	5♦

asThe hands: North ♠AJ105, ♥1052, ♦AJ92, ♣83; East ♠87643, ♥J9, ♦8, ♣AJ652; South ♠92, ♥AK74, ♦KQ7643, ♣9; West ♠KQ, ♥Q863, ♦105, ♣KQ1074

Here, filixmas was able to stop in 5♦, making 5 (for 89.71%) when he was able to maneuver two discards on dummy's spades after the K♠ lead. More than 2/3 of the field was in 4♥ going down one to five tricks. There are two particularly noteworthy facets to the bidding. First, the negative double by North only promised 3+ spades and 3+ hearts; no guarantee of four in either suit. Filixmas took the safer path, probably having seen this before. Then -- and I find this often crucial when your robot bids Blackwood and you know you're out of your depth in a slam -- filixmas lied to his robot partner. He told it that he had only one keycard.

The only other hand that filixmas had an exceptional score on (98.21%) resulted when he pushed to 5♦ in a competitive auction, was doubled and made it by eschewing finesses at every step to manage entries back and forth. So, I take filixmas's bidding and play to be an example that all of us can score high with discipline and focus and judging well the robot's proclivities. Admittedly, as least for me, that's not so easy a task.

Playing with usla

usla remains a fascination for me because of his ability to consistently achieve exceptional scores. Let's consider his top six boards in this session. You (and usla) are South throughout.

You're dealt: ♠KJ62, ♥K, ♦AKQJ, ♣8765. What do you open in third seat, both non-vulnerable, after two passes?

Knowing it's usla, you're not going to take the obvious path of opening 1♦ or even 1NT. Instead, he opened 1♣. Then came a 1NT overcall by West, 2♣ by partner, passed out.

The full deal: North ♠9543, ♥AJ97, ♦2, ♣QJ43; East ♠87, ♥108652, ♦98754, ♣10; South ♠KJ62, ♥K, ♦AKQJ, ♣8765; West ♠AQ10, ♥Q43, ♦1063, ♣AK92.

After ♣A, ♣K and a third club, usla, who knew that West had all the high-card points, was readily able to create an endplay to make 3 for 96.3%. Two-thirds of those who opened 1♦ or 1NT ended up in 4♠, down three or even four. Deception wins out, although 10% of the field did open 1♣, indicating that some share usla's tactics.

Next, you're dealt ♠AQJ8742, ♥KQ2, ♦K, ♣J2. After a pass to you, vulnerable v. not, what do you bid?

Surely not a spade. Again, 1♣ was the bid of choice, pass, 1♥ by partner, pass. So, what do you bid now? 3NT -- a favorite of uslas's.

The full deal: North ♠ --, ♥10653, ♦Q642, ♣AKQ98; East ♠3, ♥J984, ♦AJ75, ♣6543; South ♠AQJ8742, ♥KQ2, ♦K, ♣J2; West ♠K10965, ♥A7, ♦10983, ♣107. West led ♥A and another heart (no doubt based on simulations with this bidding) and usla was able to manage entries and come up with 10 tricks -- two spades, two hearts, one diamond and five clubs for 96.59%. Two-thirds of the field was in 4♠ going down one or two. Of those in NT, most played it from the North, either barely making or going down one, two or three. The

others, who played NT from the South, opened 1NT to see a splinter from partner showing shortness in spades and then continued to 3NT. Is one of the keys to try to play in 3NT whenever you can against robots, particularly after a bit of deception? The next hand may provide further evidence.

This time, as dealer, you find yourself with ♠Q652, ♥AK, ♦AQ93, ♣A105? What do you bid (NV v. V)?

Here our stalwart stretched to 2NT, partner bid 3♣ and usla bid 3♦, eschewing his four-card spade suit, presumably knowing he wanted to play in 3NT even with a 4-4 spade fit. The deception here proved helpful in the play. Partner bid 3NT over 3♦ and that was the contract. The full deal: North ♠K87, ♥10865, ♦105, ♣Q973; East ♠J103, ♥742, ♦KJ86, ♣842; South ♠Q652, ♥AK, ♦AQ93, ♣A105; West ♠A94, ♥QJ93, ♦742, ♣KJ6.

West led a small heart, taken by the ♥A. What would you play now? usla played the ♣10 covered by the ♣K. West now played the ♥Q taken by the ♥K. A small spade was led, West rose with the ♠A, no doubt thinking there was little harm as South can only have 3 spades at most, cashed the ♥J (remember robots can be awful defenders) and played another spade. Curtains for the defense. It's particularly noteworthy that usla avoided the diamond finesse (even though here it worked) and played clubs the way he did. usla made four for 96.88%. Not surprisingly, 60% of the players here didn't reach game. Of those who did, 80% either made only three or went down one. The key difference in the defense (because South had shown his four-card spade suit in the bidding) was that West didn't play his ♠A early, so N-S lost two spade tricks after they led them.

Next you hold ♠92, ♥AJ73, ♦KQJ106, ♣KQ in fourth seat. Bidding goes P-1♠-P to you. What do you bid (both vul)?

Well, if you were me, you'd bid 2♦ and think easy-peasy. Not so fast. usla, not surprisingly, bid 2♣. After seeing this, I pondered the question of whether usla's bids were no-risk if NT was the ultimate destination? Perhaps they were. I needed to pick my spots and try more of them, although usla seems to view every hand as

one on which to practice deception. The bidding proceeded with North bidding 3♣ and usla bidding 3NT.

The full deal: North ♠AK10864, ♥--, ♦543, ♣A943; East ♠5, ♥Q98652, ♦A7, ♣10865; South ♠92, ♥AJ73, ♦KQJ106, ♣KQ; West ♠QJ73, ♥K104, ♦982, ♣J72.

On the bidding, West not surprisingly led a diamond. Taken by the ♦A, heart back, taken by the ♥A. Next the ♠9 was played, covered by the ♠J. Now back to hand with a diamond. usla ran the diamonds, cashed the ♣K and ♣Q, and finessed the ♠10 to make 6 -- for 100%. A few people were in spades making at most five. Those in NT made at most four, going down if they misplayed the hearts. Why at most four? Because they bid diamonds and didn't receive a diamond lead, so some number of hearts were cashed after the ♦A won. Again, bidding 3NT after some deception worked out extremely well.

Now, both vulnerable, our hero as dealer held: ♠KQJ32, ♥K84, ♦AQ6, ♣93. Does he bid 1NT or 1♠?

No, he bid 1♣. Looks like a NT hand, so why not a bit of deception? The opponents passed throughout and he heard 2♣ -- inverted minor -- by his partner. Now 2NT or 3NT, surely. Nope. The deception continued. 2♥ was the bid, 3♣ by partner. Now, the deception complete, usla bid 3NT.

The full deal: North ♠74, ♥Q5, ♦J1075, ♣AK742; East ♠1098, ♥AJ763, ♦82, ♣Q108; South ♠KQJ32, ♥K84, ♦AQ6, ♣93; West ♠A65, ♥1092, ♦JK943, ♣J65.

The ♥10 was led and won by the ♥A (bad defense to be sure), but now, thinking usla must have little in spades, a spade was led. usla played the ♠K of course. East won the ♠A and naturally continued spades. Now there was time to develop the diamonds and make four for another 100%. A few were in 4♠, making four; many were in 3NT making at best three, and often fewer because they'd bid spades. The pattern is clear -- if 3NT is in the cards (and it appears to be on an inordinate number of occasions), practice some deception.

Last hand, both non-vulnerable, usla held ♠KJ6, ♥72, ♦A965, ♣AQ42. The bidding went P-1♠-P to you. What do you bid?

A couple of bids cry out: 2♣ or 2♦. Not for usla. You guessed it. 2♥ was his bid. Now partner offered 2♠ and you guessed it again -- 3NT was his bid. The full deal: North ♠AQ975, ♥KJ, ♦Q73, ♣J86; East ♠843, ♥10843, ♦K2, ♣10953; South ♠KJ6, ♥72, ♦A965, ♣AQ42; West ♠102, ♥AQ965, ♦J1084, ♣K7.

Now it's hard to blame West for not leading a heart on that bidding; it led a low diamond instead. Dummy played low and East now had to pop up with the ♦K. Then, a low club was led to dummy. West rose with the ♣K and returned a diamond. Now, usla had ten tricks -- five spades, two diamonds and three clubs. Hearts never had to be touched. 98.5%. 90% of folks were in 4♠, either making or going down one.

I was going to tell you some of my adventures and misadventures using usla's tactics, but that and other vagaries of robot play will have to wait until next week.