Playing with Robots

Part VI

By pluckycat

If you've been following this series, you know I've been saying that robot play almost invariably asks you to make tough choices. Usually I've described successes. This week, I'll focus on my pratfalls and learning experiences. I'll present a few problem hands I encountered and ask you what you would have done. Later in this article, I'll describe the results of the bids that were made.

1. As South, no one vulnerable, you hold ♠KJ72 ♥94 ♦Q2 ♣AKQ92. The bidding is Pass by partner, 2♠ by RHO, to you. What do you do?

2. As South, all vulnerable, you hold ♠9643 ♥A ♦K7 ♣AKJ1097. The bidding is 1♣ by you, 1♥, Pass, 3♥, back to you. What do you do? Let's say you double to bring spades into play. A double by you is a take-out double, showing 4-5 clubs, 3-5 diamonds, 2-hearts, and 3-4 spades, 15-21 HCP, 16-22 total points. Roughly what you have. So, what could go wrong? Well, partner robot now bids 4♥, which when you click on it, reveals only 10+ total points. What do you do now?

3. In first seat, no on vulnerable, as South you hold ♠AJ4 ♥75 ♦832 ♣AKJ106. You open 1♣, followed by Pass, Pass, 1♦. What do you do now? (If I'm asking the question, that means the obvious answer is not the one that garnered the laurels here.)

Another game of interest

As you know from previous articles, I frequently try to explore some of the myriad games BBO offers in which you play against robots. This week, I want to highlight the ACBL Robot Duplicate (12 boards), $1.25. These games are available throughout the day and offer an alternative to the Daylong ACBL games. They're worth playing on occasion for a variety of reasons. The two games I played in were evening games. One had 35 participants and the other 55. You compete against those players with the same set of boards and, at the end of an hour, you get the

results. You're given 58 minutes to play 12 boards. It took me, at a leisurely pace, 30 minutes to play the 12 boards. I then logged off and came back 30 minutes later to get the results. I liked the game because, unlike the daylongs, you compete against a small group, not many hundreds, and you compete with the same boards (unlike the daylongs, which of necessity must vary the boards for different groups so early players can't tell later players what the boards were). I judged the quality of play to be slightly below that of a Hartford Bridge Club open game. The rewards are less than for the ACBL Daylongs. A small set of players, usually three or four, earn .9 for high placements. Less than the 1.50 you can earn in daylongs, but you're competing against 1/20th the number of players. They're worth a try if you have a half hour or so in the evening.

Answers to problem hands

Board 1

No one vulnerable, as South you hold ♠KJ72 ♥94 ♦Q2 ♣AKQ92. The bidding is Pass by partner, 2♠ by RHO, to you. What do you do?

The full deal was North ♠6 ♥Q52 ♦AKJ10 ♣J8764; East ♠A109543 ♥K83 ♦84 ♣105; South ♠KJ72 ♥94 ♦Q2 ♣AKQ92; West ♠Q8 ♥AJ1076 ♦97653 ♣3. After East's 2♠ bid, Souths' bids were Pass, 2NT, 3♣, and double.

South players who passed, heard their partners' double. About 25% of the field stood for the double. Those who did achieved a terrible result: two spades either went down one or made. So, they got either 15% or 3%. This result was typical of robot play. With some exceptions, doubling contracts yields a poor result. Most often you want to play the hand. There usually is a way to do well if you play the hand effectively. South players who bid 3NT after robot partner doubled got an excellent result, making 4NT, 5NT or 6NT for 82%, 91%, and 98% respectively. About 20% of the field bid 3NT.

Souths who bid 2NT over East's 2♠ heard partner robot cue bid 3♠ and ended up bidding 4♣, which partner raised to five. All who bid 5♣ made six because the robot defendants, as is their wont, made a neutral lead of a diamond against the game contract. These folks received 68%.

A plurality of Souths bid 3 ♣, which was passed out. Here, the robots defending against 3 ♣ chose to lead a spade and the robot opponents took their top three tricks. I was among those choosing 3 ♣ for 40%.

One wayward South doubled the 2 ♠ bid and his robot partner bid 3 ♣, which he passed out for a decent 56% because, here, leading into the double, again, the robot chose a neutral lead of a diamond allowing declarer to make six.

Board 2

All vulnerable, as South you hold ♠9643 ♥A ♦K7 ♣AKJ1097. The bidding is 1♣ by you, 1 ♥, Pass, 3 ♥, back to you. What do you do? Let's say you double to bring spades into play. A double by you is a take-out double, showing 4-5 clubs, 3-5 diamonds, 2-hearts, and 3-4 spades, 15-21 HCP, 16-22 total points. Roughly what you have. So, what could go wrong? Well, partner robot now bids 4 ♥, which when you click it, reveals only 10+ total points. What do you do now?

The full deal was North ♠KQJ ♥1073 ♦Q852 ♣Q82; East ♠10853 ♥K853 ♦9643 ♣6; South ♠9642 ♥A ♦K7 ♣AKJ1097; West ♠A7 ♥QJ962 ♦AJ10 ♣543. First, let me say that the several Souths who opened this hand 1NT did best. The bidding in those cases went 1NT-3NT, making 3, 4, or 5 and averaging above 90%.

Otherwise, the bidding went 1♣, 1♥, Pass, 3♥. A third of the Souths passed the 3♥ bid and received 34%. Again, it pays to declare as long as you find the right level and denomination. A quarter of the participants bid 3♠ over 3♥ with that anemic suit. That told dummy robot that South had 5+C, 21-HCP, rebiddable spades, and 18-22 total points. Seemed wrong to me at the time of decision, but what happened was that dummy bid Blackwood and they ended up in 5♠ down one for 65%. About an equal number of participants bid 4♣ over 3♥ and ended up in 5♣, also down one for 65%.

Now, if you – like me – bid 5♣ over the 4♥ bid, showing exactly the same as what your double showed, your robot dummy bid 5 ♦. You curse and call it a moron but then, reflecting, you wonder if the moron might be you because you led it astray with your double. It does after all have four diamonds. Anyway, you take little pleasure in the fact that you go down only four while the two other pairs in 5 ♦ go

down five, vulnerable. I got 6% on the board. Bidding 6♣ would not have been better because it was almost certain to get a double. Robots usually know when you're way out of your depth.

Is there a lesson here? Maybe more than one. Again, playing the contract in a competitive auction most often seems right. Also, doubles at high levels may get your robot excited. Make sure your hand suits what you're telling the robot. Here I lied about diamonds and it was costly. Better a 4♣ bid. Again, be particularly carefully not to lie with your double when vulnerable. A reminder that bridge is a humbling game.

Board 3

No one vulnerable, in first seat, as South you hold ♠AJ4 ♥75 ♦832 ♣AKJ106. You open 1♣, followed by Pass, Pass, 1♦. What do you do now?

70% of the players – like me – passed. If you passed, E-W reached 3NT. The bidding was West 2♦, East 3♦, West-3NT. If you bid 2♣, which about 29% did, East-West subsided in 2♦. The full deal was North ♠86532 ♥10963 ♦A9 ♣75; East ♠107 ♥AK42 ♦KQ1054 ♣43; South ♠AJ4 ♥75 ♦832 ♣AKJ106; West ♠KQ9 ♥QJ8 ♦J76 ♣Q982.

This seemingly unremarkable deal nonetheless contains a number of noteworthy lessons. First and perhaps foremost, robots are very much influenced by opposition bidding. Remember, they do simulations to bid and play. So here, once N-S stopped bidding over 2♦, East felt it could invite and West with a good club stopper and 11 HCPs, felt it could bid 3NT. When South rebid clubs, presumably showing additional strength, E-W did not go on. Vulnerability matters greatly when playing with robots. Take risks with your passed partner non-vulnerable; take almost no risks vulnerable.

Well, you say wait a minute. Looking at all four hands, 3NT is sure to go down at least one. I say you are forgetting about the defense robot partner mounted as it also took into account the opponent's bidding. So, your poor benighted robot partner did not lead partner's suit, but led a heart, which went around to the eight. A diamond was then led and robot partner put up the ♦A. Now with a second chance to do right and lead your suit, robot partner led …. a small spade. Defense

over. E-W making 3. Everyone who bid only 1♣ received 36% -- all robots acted the same. Everyone who bid 2♣ received 82% when 2♦ made 3.

You might have noticed that I only accounted for 99% of the bids. One South opened 1NT, and was Jacoby-transferred to 2♠ buying the contract. Going down one in 2♠ was worth 100%. An aberrant bid you say. Well, perhaps. Hold off judgment until after next week's article when I explore the bidding tactics of some of those who are hugely successful in playing against robots and score in the 80% range. We'll look at how they do it and what we can learn from them.

One last note: if you missed last week's article, all the information I provided about the three hands comes from looking at the travellers and movies of those hands. If you don't know how to view travellers and movies, look back at last week's article.