

Playing with Robots

Part XXXI

By pluckycat

This Sunday, November 22, members of the Hartford Bridge Club will have a wonderful opportunity to partner with a robot and play against other members of the club, who will also be partnered with robots. It should be a lot of fun. Since I hope many of you will take advantage of the opportunity and, to be sure, the challenge, this week I list my top ten tips for playing with and against robots.

Also, this weekend and Monday, BBO will host the North American Bridge Championship Robot Individual, in which one gets to partner with a robot playing against two other robots. Typically, thousands of individuals enter this contest, which is stratified. Last weekend was the last of the practice rounds for this championship, so I also analyze the bidding of the person, rogerclee, who came in first overall for the two days of practice rounds with an average on the 24 boards of more than 80%. Warning: His bidding methods come with no guarantee of success in robot games, but his methods do mirror the methods of the other very successful online players we've looked at in past weeks. And scoring over 80% warrants more than some admiration.

Top ten tips:

1. Always—and I mean always—review what your robot partner's bid means. This means clicking on the robot's bid if it doesn't appear automatically. Be particularly aware of the meaning of Total Points in the description: High Card Points (HCP) + 3 for a void, 2 for a singleton and 1 for a doubleton, (but short suits containing an honor are reduced by 1 point). The robot will usually force to game if it thinks it has 25 Total Points between the two hands.
2. Always—and again I mean always—make sure you know how your robot will interpret your bid. This means hovering your mouse over a bid you plan to make and seeing what it says, if the explanation doesn't come up automatically.
3. Don't be aggressive with robots. If you have an invitational hand, invite, don't leap. What this often means is don't bid the values of your hand twice. Good advice for playing with human partners, but particularly good advice when playing with robots who may put you in unmakeable contracts if you don't have the extras your robot thought you promised with your bid (while you thought you were just competing).
4. When declaring give the robot defender a chance to make an error, which often means ducking whenever you possibly can. It's surprising how often robots make a favorable (for you) switch to another suit when they should continue the one it or its partner started.

5. Pay particular attention to the fact that when a robot defends against NT, it usually leads passively and not necessarily its longest suit. Similarly, it frustratingly doesn't assume you're leading your longest suit either, so it often doesn't return your lead.
6. In suit contracts, robots often lead singletons, almost always that's the case when your side has bid the suit.
7. Don't count on the robot to give count in response to your opening lead. It will give attitude, and a high spot card indicates Ace or King or Queen behind Ace and King.
8. Don't get frustrated. This perhaps should have been the first tip. Robots can make some maddening plays. But they're also capable of very sound bridge. Roll with the bad and applaud the good. They're not human but, like humans, they're not perfect.
9. Robots play very quickly. Don't be hurried by their tempo. Use their quick play to give yourself extra time to focus without time pressure.
10. Robots are susceptible to deceptive bids. You may have opportunities to deceive a bot opponent while not worrying about your own bot partner. And even if the bid goes wrong, your robot will never, ever criticize you. So, enjoy the experience and have fun.

Hope to see you on Sunday.

Now to the analysis of rogerclee's bidding.

Rogerclee will open 1NT from seemingly any seat, regardless of vulnerability, with any 14-16 HCP hand regardless of distribution. And, as you will see, I truly mean regardless of distribution. In the 24 deals, he opened 1NT with the all of the following hands:

1. ♠K ♥K93 ♦A8 ♣KQ87632 (Result: 4♣x, down one, for 97.06%)
2. ♠K9 ♥AKQJ72 ♦Q ♣9743 (Result: 3NT, making 5, for 100%)
3. ♠94 ♥4 ♦AKQ9764 ♣AJ4 (Result: 3NT, making 4, for 98.46%)
4. ♠AJ106 ♥AQ8 ♦J10842 ♣A (Result: 4♠, making 4, for 96.30%)
5. ♠J9 ♥AK5 ♦KJ1087 ♣Q64 (Result: 1NT, making 2, for 94.44%)
6. ♠KJ1074 ♥K ♦J9 ♣AK983 (Result: 1NT, making 2, for 62.07%)
7. ♠A9765 ♥964 ♦Q3 ♣AKJ (Result: 3NT, making 3, for 67.19%)
8. ♠KQ4 ♥A5 ♦K8754 ♣Q62 (Result: 4♥, down one, for 89.86%)
9. ♠K9 ♥AK74 ♦932 ♣KJ83 (Result: 2♥, making 3, for 62.69%)
10. ♠64 ♥Q43 ♦K104 ♣AKQJ4 (Result: 3NT, making 5, for 85.58%)

Rogerclee averaged 85.37 on these 10 boards. In addition, he opened 1NT on three hands in which he had a balanced 16 points and you and I would have readily done the same. Opening 1NT with the above hands didn't prevent rogerclee from getting to the right contract even if it was not in no trump. Unfortunately, there weren't any 13HCP hands in these 24 boards to see what rogerclee

would have done with them. He opened 11- and 12-point hands in a suit and was very conservative with them (often passing a response) recognizing no doubt in a "best hand" tournament he would have difficulty making game if his partner had no more HCPs than he did.

A couple of further observations: like usla, leftfoot and Leo LaSota, whose bidding methods we reviewed in recent articles, rogerclee received the benefit of helpful leads and defense. These experts all strive for NT games or NT part scores, if game is clearly out of the question. They do so in particular because the robots are very likely to start with a passive lead and give these declarers a leg up because their bidding hid a vulnerability that might otherwise be successfully attacked by active defense. Further, the defense often misguesses the distribution or the high card strength of declarer because the robots attribute an extra king or queen to declarer. The robots' defense relies on simulations and the simulations have the declarer having 16 or 17 HCPs, not 14, giving declarers time to develop their tricks. To be sure, rogerclee, like the others we've studied, plays the hands extremely well, but the advantage gained by misleading the robots shouldn't be underestimated. I'm more and more convinced that to compete with these experts, you need to bid more like them. Do any of you bid 1NT on hands like 1-3 above? If you do, please let me know the results.

In the meantime, stay healthy and safe and I look forward to seeing you at the HBC robot game this Sunday at 1:30.