

Playing with Robots

Part XL

By pluckycat

Bridge is a fascinating game for many reasons, but one of those reasons is that no matter how experienced you think you are, you can still see stuff that has the capacity to astonish you. Last week, I ventured to play again with humans in an individual game, in which you get a different partner every three boards in a 12-board tournament played either for masterpoints or IMPs. I've described these individual games before (see e.g., [Playing with Robots](#) Parts V and IX) and I now play them every six weeks or so when I need to be reminded why I like playing with robots so much. The humans I play with rarely disappoint—that is, they commit such atrocities at the bridge table that I'm eager to get back and embrace the mechanical arms of my steadfast, generally reliable and usually predictable robot opponents and partners. "Atrocities, pluckycat?," you say. Surely, I'm exaggerating, you think. Well, I'll leave you to judge for yourself after we venture through some of the boards in this individual tournament.

Let me set the scene. The tournament is an IMP tournament and the first three hands are relatively uneventful. I'm down a couple of IMPs because my partner overbid in a competitive auction, but nothing out of the ordinary has occurred. The second round starts and I do what I always do. I quickly click on the profiles of my partner and my opponents, trying to glean some intelligence about how competent, reliable and trustworthy their bidding and card play may be. To be sure, this is more art than science, but I've learned that beginners who play only Blackwood and the SAYC (Standard American Yellow Card) are to be handled with great care. So are others who play very few conventions and have amassed very few BBO points over an extended online career, no matter what level they designate themselves. On the other hand, I'm more careful about the liberties I take with those who've come to online bridge late, have quickly amassed a good many BBO points and play sophisticated conventions. I also pay particular attention to the first hand of the three-hand set to get a further sense of what I'm up against, whether in a partner or opponent.

Board four arrives and my partner's profile doesn't inspire confidence; a member since 2017, with few BBO points, she describes herself as an intermediate and lists "upside carding [not a typo], 4♣ asks for Aces (nothing about Blackwood), and transfers to majors and minors." I've been duly put on notice—this profile screams, "Be careful, be very, very careful."

We're both vulnerable. In second seat, my partner opened the bidding 1♣. Opponents passed throughout. I held ♠AKJ32 ♥98 ♦A9 ♣J642. I bid 1♠. She now jumped to 4♠. Visions of slam danced in my head. She should have 19 or 20 total points for this bid. Everybody knows that, I think. My robots certainly do. I could have a bare, bare minimum with four spades. So, I bid 4NT

and she responded 5♥. I trusted that this showed two Aces without the ♠Q, so I confidently bid 6♠.

Dummy came down: ♠864 ♥AQ5 ♦Q106 ♣AQ95.

Did I say I had been duly warned? The ♦J was led and I'm going to show you the full deal and allow you to spend a moment contemplating how you would make 6♠.

The full deal:

D	N Prius5	W	N	E	S
	♠ 864	P	1♣	P	1♠
	♥ AQ5	P	4♣	P	4NT
	♦ Q106	P	5♥	P	6♣
	♣ AQ95	P	P	P	
W satjeet		E mlang			
♠ Q95		♠ 107			
♥ KJ		♥ 1076432			
♦ KJ843		♦ 752			
♣ K107		♣ 83			
	S pluckycat				
	♠ AKJ32				
	♥ 98				
	♦ A9				
	♣ J642				
		6♠ S	NS: 0	EW: 0	

My LHO is a self-styled intermediate with fewer BBO points than my partner, although he's been playing since 2016; his profile is also completely blank—a telltale sign for me that this might not be a formidable adversary. Admittedly, he had a difficult lead, so let's excuse the ♦J lead (although almost everyone else in his position led a low diamond against 4♠). I saw a glimmer of hope. If everything is right, I might even make seven. To my surprise, I won the ♦J with the ♦Q in dummy. I took the spade finesse and when that lost, the sugar plums dancing in my head disappeared. But wait, back came the ♦K by West. I'd like to think that no self-respecting robot would do that. Why not just lead a low spade back and give away nothing? Anyway, I grabbed the ♦K with the ♦A and now had a parking place for my second heart and could avoid the heart finesse. I drew trump and miraculously all I needed to do then was bring in the club suit without a loss. I decided to play West for ♣Kx or ♣K10 and East for ♣10xx or ♣xxx. Playing that way also gave me a chance should West have a singleton ♣K or should West decide to continue to be helpful from ♣K10x or even ♣K10xx. So, I led a low trump from the board and, sure enough, West, for some reason that I am sure my bots would deem foolish, popped up with the ♣10 from ♣K10x. Ball game over. Slam made. No one else in their right mind was even close to bidding slam and we got nearly 14 IMPs, 10 more IMPs than those making 11 tricks in NT or spades. No one else made 12 tricks.

I almost never comment to partners in individual games, but I felt compelled to say in a chat, "You might consider having a bit more for your 4♠ bids." She responded, "I know, but you made it didn't you? So, what are you complaining about?" Right, she was. What could I be complaining about?

The next board reared its head. We were vulnerable versus not and, in first seat, my partner opened 3♥. RHO overcalled 3♠ and I sat with ♠AQ1072 ♥7 ♦J74 ♣A874. What would you bid?

What can partner have? Give her ♥AKxxxx at best. She's unlikely to have more than one spade if that. At best, she's likely, in my view, to come to eight or nine tricks. No good reason to bid on and doubling may cause them to find a diamond fit or may cause partner to bid on with a void in spades. After the first board, I don't trust her to pass a double. I think a small plus is the best we're likely to achieve here. So, I passed. Would you have? Before I show you the full deal, what do you think is the best possible hand my partner could have for her bid. Keep that in mind when you now stare at her hand.

The full deal:

<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> W satjeet N Prius5 </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>♠ J84</p> <p>♥ 6543</p> <p>♦ 52</p> <p>♣ 9653</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>♠ AKQJ1092</p> <p>♥ AKxxxx</p> <p>♦ KQ96</p> <p>♣ K10</p> </div> </div>		<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> W N E S </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <p>3♥</p> <p>3♠</p> <p>P</p> <p>P</p> </div>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> S pluckycat E mlang </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>♠ AQ1072</p> <p>♥ 7</p> <p>♦ J74</p> <p>♣ A874</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>♠ K9653</p> <p>♥ 8</p> <p>♦ A1083</p> <p>♣ QJ2</p> </div> </div>		<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> 3♠ E NS: 0 EW: 0 </div>

Astonished yet? The 3♠ bid by East is by no means a thing of beauty either, but really, North? 3♥? Why on god's green earth? I almost had to excuse myself when my partner's hand was revealed; my jaw had hit the floor hard and I was having trouble closing it. I made no comment, although I was sorely tempted to say, "I hope my previous comment didn't unduly influence you here. You might want to have a little less for that bid." Anyway, 3♠ was down 4 for +200 for us, but minus 9 IMPs. A half dozen rested in 4♥; another half dozen was in 6♥ or 6NT. Several opened my partner's hand 2♣ (my choice), while most contented themselves with opening 1♥, but most then only got to game.

The next board was, if possible, even more frustrating, for completely different reasons.

I picked up ♥1054 ♦A8754 ♣AJ752 in second seat, nonvulnerable versus vulnerable. Pass to me, I passed, 1♠ on my left, partner overcalled 2♥, 2♠ by RHO. "What the hell," I thought. "I'll make the bid I would have made with a regular partner. 4♥s it is. It should have a play even by this partner."

The full deal:

		N Prius5	W	N	E	S
		♠ Q1092	1♠	2♥	P	P
		♥ KQ832	P	P	2♠	4♥
		♦ 10			P	
		♣ K84				
W satjeet			E mlang			
♠ KJ843			♠ A765			
♥ AJ97			♥ 6			
♦ QJ			♦ K9632			
♣ Q9			♠ 1053			
	S pluckycat					
	♠					
	♥ 1054					
	♦ A8754					
	♣ AJ762					
			4♥ N		NS: 0 EW: 0	

Did she have her 2♥ bid? Well, she certainly wasn't going to be accused of underbidding again! And the 4♥ game did have distinct possibilities. The ♠A was led and now, with careful play, 4♥s cannot be beaten. Will there be careful play? I never found out. My erstwhile partner proceeded, in agonizingly slow fashion, to commence a crossruff. She ruffed the ♠A in dummy, paused interminably, cashed the ♦A, paused again, ruffed a diamond, another pause, ruffed another spade, a longer pause, ruffed a diamond, ruffed another spade, ruffed another diamond with the ♥8, on which West (remember it is he who made all those helpful leads on board 4) helpfully underruffed with the ♥7. And then time expired. Something that never happens against robots.

Would my partner have continued the winning line? Alas, I'll never know. She needed to ruff another spade for her sixth trick, play the ♣K and ♣A for tricks seven and eight and then play either a club or diamond and be assured of 10 tricks with two more hearts. However, when the screen went blank, would she have then taken the club finesse and managed to lose a club, two hearts and a spade? Again, frustratingly we'll never know.

The frustrations continued to pile up on this board. We got an average, which in IMPs means a zero—neither positive nor negative. However, making 4♥ would have given us nearly 9 IMPs. I should have called the director immediately and argued my case that declarer would have, of course, found the winning line. I've done this successfully in other pairs tournaments when time has run out on a hand and when BBO makes a determination that I can show is different from the one my pair could have achieved. But those are stories for another time. Because individual 12-board tournaments are played at a speedball tournament pace—14 minutes for three boards—and I was loath to spend time in the next round making the argument. So, I waited until after the tournament when I have 20 minutes to seek an adjustment. But again frustration. I couldn't find a director online at 9 p.m. to plead my case.

The frustrations also grew in the next round. We got too high when my partner made a negative double without the goods and we lost 5 IMPs. But it was the last round that makes me truly yearn for my mechanical friends.

My partner this time was someone whose profile revealed only Michaels and Blackwood as his conventions. He has also played since 2011 without amassing very many points. Again, forewarned but also powerless to do anything about it, I picked up ♠KJ9 ♥AQ98 ♦QJ87 ♣86 on the penultimate deal in the tournament. In first seat, both nonvulnerable, I opened 1♦. Passed to my partner who now bid 2♥. What does that mean? I have no way of knowing. So, I judged to raise to 3♥, just in case it was a strong hand. 3♥ was passed out. My partner had ♠Q853 ♥KJ10742 ♣QJ3. In what world is that a 2♥ bid over 1♦? And even if it is, how can he not raise 3♥ to 4♥? For nearly every other pair, the auction went 1♦-P-1♥-P-2♥-P-4♥. Making 4—minus 5 IMPs for us for not reaching game.

The full deal:

		N collectorn ♠ Q853 ♥ KJ10742 ♦ ♣ QJ3	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>W</th> <th>N</th> <th>E</th> <th>S</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>2♥</td> <td>P</td> <td>1♦</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td>3♥</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	W	N	E	S	P	2♥	P	1♦	P	P	P	3♥
W	N	E	S												
P	2♥	P	1♦												
P	P	P	3♥												
W FloraT2 ♠ A ♥ 5 ♦ AK96543 ♣ K1074			E tjpops ♠ 107642 ♥ 63 ♦ 102 ♣ A952												
		S pluckycat ♠ KJ9 ♥ AQ98 ♦ QJ87 ♣ 86	3♥ N NS: 0 EW: 0												

It's one of those rounds where the last board can't come soon enough. On the last board, my partner made a bid I didn't understand and, unlike with robots, I couldn't click on it to see what it meant. I stormed into 3NT mostly because we are vulnerable and I needed a good board. We were one of only two pairs in game. The play was a comedy of errors by the defense and I made 3NT on an endplay with our combined 22 HCP for 10 IMPs. When the dust settled, I was above average after a truly rollercoaster ride. Happy to escape the volatility and go back to the placid waters of my robot world, where I can finish boards at leisure and generally know what my partner is bidding and holding.

Stay safe and healthy and see you this Sunday, I hope, when we all get to play with my favorite mechanical friends at the Hartford Bridge Club's online game.