

Playing with Robots

Part XXI

By pluckycat

Last Sunday, at around 3:50 p.m., I got a hankering to play bridge and made a last-minute decision to join the Sunday afternoon HBC game. It was a splendid afternoon and, not surprisingly, there were few entrants and no one at the partnership desk. So, I embarked on a new adventure with robots, enlisting one as my partner for the first time ever against other humans. As always, I learned new lessons and relearned old ones. This week, I will explore in some depth two of the key hands from that afternoon's session.

Before getting to the specific hands, let me make a few overall comments. If one reviews the recent results of robots playing in HBC open games, one sees that robots playing with human partners generally have obtained fair, but certainly by no means outstanding, results. They achieve percentages in the high 40's and low 50's with an occasional breakthrough to 60's. In my session with my robot, I found that its bidding was sound, its declarer play was equally sound and its defense generally good with occasional serious lapses. In a four-table movement, where you have to discount the outcome because one aberrant board can significantly skew the results, we managed to come in a bit above average, but nonetheless a section top. Most of the significant errors in the session were made by my robot's all too fallible human partner.

Two hands were particularly noteworthy:

Board 17

You are dealt as South: ♠9632 ♥J975 ♦K4 ♣AQ3

This is the bidding:

W	N	E	S
	P	1NT	P
2♥	X	P	P
3♦	P	3NT	P
P	P		

What would you lead?

I think it's clear you want to lead a heart after the lead-directing double, but which heart?

After a little deliberation, I chose the ♥5, reasoning that the NT bidder may possibly have four hearts to the ♥10 and my ♥J may come into play. Further, robots lead fourth best and should recognize that lead. Both misguided thoughts upon later reflection. Anyway, my robot played the ♥Q after dummy came down with ♠AK1074 ♥8 ♦QJ976 ♣95. The ♥Q held the trick as declarer played the ♥4. My robot played the ♣2, declarer played the ♣J and I won with the ♣Q, muttering under my breath at my mechanical partner for not leading another ♥.

What now? I led a ♥ back of course. Reflexively, without much thought and while still muttering imprecations against my bot partner, I led back the ♥7. My bot won the ♥K as dummy discarded a ♦ and declarer played the ♥10. Now my bot led the ♣4, declarer played the ♣K and I played the ♣A. Now I'm really hot. Damn that bot! Doesn't it know to lead back a ♥? I now led back the ♥9. Ball game over, declarer took his ♥A and had more than enough tricks to make 3NT—five spades, three clubs, and the ♦A. Ugh.

When I cooled down, I began to analyze the hand from my bot's point of view. Upon reflection, the person I should have been cursing was the bot's (have I said this before?) all too fallible human partner. What did the bot's double of 2♥ indicate? Would it double with only four hearts? From its perspective, when I led the ♥5, I could have been leading from ♥975, just what the bot would do if it was on lead. Robots tend to trust opponents' bids, sometimes to their severe detriment, which is why you can make a bid to deter them from playing a suit in which you're vulnerable. So, no doubt, my bot figured that East had ♥AJ104 after I led the ♥5. And when I led back the ♥7 after winning the ♣Q and declarer played the ♥10 under its ♥K, it probably now thought declarer had ♥A1094 and declarer had made a subtle false card and would play the ♥A to trap my ♥J.

I could have made it all so much easier for my thoughtful bot if I'd just led the ♥J, at least at my second turn on lead. Now the bot could have ducked with its ♥K and there'd be no way declarer could prevent the defense from taking five tricks—at least three hearts and another club or a diamond. The play on the first trick confirmed that the bot had to have the ♥KQ. Moreover, based on declarer's 1NT opening (more about that later), my robot couldn't have more than the ♥KQ in HCPs so there was no entry to have it lead a heart through declarer anyway if I thought declarer might have four hearts to the ♥A10xx. Finally, since dummy had the singleton ♥8, I should have been alert to the distinct possibility that the suit would block after I led the ♥5. In short, everything points to leading the ♥J at my second turn.

The full deal:

17		N Robot			
		♠J8			
		♥KQ632			
		♦1085			
		♣642			
W yf1973		W	N	E	S
♠AK1074		Pass	1NT	Pass	Pass
♥8		2♥	Dbt	Pass	Pass
♦QJ976		3♦	Pass	3NT	Pass
♣95		Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass
		S pluckycat			
		♠9632			
		♥J975			
		♦K4			
		♣AQ3			
				3NT	East
				0	0

A couple of further comments: Note that East upgraded his 14-HCP hand to open 1NT. That is something I would have done with a good five-card minor. Interestingly, all three other East-West pairs reached 3NT even after opening 1♣. Typically, West thereafter invited and East accepted. Surprisingly, two of the other three declarers made 3NT, so my bot and I received an undeserved 33% on the board. The other South defenders had no idea of their partner's heart holding as there was no opportunity to double. Still two led a heart, one persisted to set the contract two while the other North switched to a ♣ as did my bot, reinforcing the notion that defense can be bloody hard.

Board 12

The next hand presented a bidding challenge and an opportunity.

Three passes to you and you find yourself with ♠A8 ♥AJ42 ♦AKQJ8 ♣43.

What do you bid?

With those lovely and powerful diamonds, I upgraded and opened 2NT. Opponents passed throughout and my partner bid 3♦. What would you bid next?

Well, I could have super-accepted and bid 4♥, but I feared that would end the auction and I didn't need much from dummy to have a good shot at slam. ♥Kxxxx of hearts and ♣A or ♣KQ or even a well-placed ♣K. So, I contented myself with 3♥ to see what the bot would say next. I knew I ran the risk that my bot would pass 3♥, but that was a risk I was willing to run because even if it had a bust with 3 HCPs and some distribution, I was confident the bot would go to 4♥. And if it had a true bust, we might not even make four, while others would have languished in 1♦, which is what I suspected most Souths would have opened.

Anyway, my bot responded 4♣. Now I was excited. Why was it bidding 4♣? I clicked the bid and saw that it had 5+♥, 4+♣, 8-11 HCP, 12 total points. I knew I should check with Blackwood, but I was convinced that my bot would only make that bid with slam interest and either the ♣A or ♣KQ or even more. It had to be at the top of its range. I eschewed Blackwood, because even if I found only one key card, I had convinced myself I was going to slam. So, perhaps foolishly, but full of conviction about my bot's bidding, I leapt to 6♥. I was rewarded for my faith in my bot's bidding.

The full deal:

Board 12		Robot	
		♠43	
		♥K9765	
		♦106	
		♣AK102	
W	N	E	S
annie 15			Mikey1949
♠Q952	Pass	Pass	2NT
♥Q8	Pass	3♦	Pass
♦743	Pass	4♣	Pass
♣QJ95	Pass	Pass	Pass
		♠KJ1076	
		♥103	
		♦952	
		♣876	
		pluckycat	
		♠A8	
		♥AJ42	
		♦AKQJ8	
		♣43	
		6♥	South
		0	0

After a low ♠ opening lead, I played the ♠A and then played for the ♥Q to drop. Conveniently, it did. Had it not, I would have played on diamonds, hoping they were no worse than 4-2. Making 7 for a cold top. No one else even sniffed at slam, not getting beyond 4♥. One auction went P-P-P-1♦ -P- 1♥ -P- 4♥. Another started with 2NT, but then super accepted to end the auction at 4♥.

So, the lesson for today is trust your bot and try to get in tune with its thinking. It's thoughtful, well-educated and calculating. But know too, it has to be able to trust you. On Tuesday, an opponent was playing with a robot. The robot opened 1♦. With 3 HCPs and a singleton ♦, my opponent bid 1♥. The bot, with a good 20 HCPs, splintered and drove past game to make a slam inquiry for a disastrous result, a tie for bottom for the opponents. Don't lie to your bot. It will believe your initial bids, even if, thereafter, you try for a seemingly hard stop.

Stay safe and healthy and see you next week.