

Playing with Robots

Part XXIII

By pluckycat

Last week, we analyzed the hands bid and played by Leo Lasota, the Ace on BBO—the person who has earned the most masterpoints lifetime on BBO. This week, I played in an eight-board daylong BBO masterpoint session and noted that my old friend Usla was at the top of the field with 81.32%. Regular readers of these articles will remember Usla, a Romanian expert, who is a K—and the person who has earned the second most masterpoints lifetime on BBO. I couldn't resist analyzing the eight boards he bid and played. As usual, a fascinating window into topflight robot bidding and play on BBO.

Usla was featured in Parts VII and VIII of this series and again in Part XIII, in which he offered a series of tips. After his bidding was analyzed, I received emails complaining about what several perceived as his illegitimate tactics. Not surprisingly, after I analyzed Leo LaSota's bidding, I received queries about the legitimacy of his bidding. As I said in Part VIII of this series, robot play is different than playing against humans. Anything goes—and what is particularly intriguing to me is how LaSota and Usla decide to stray from bidding norms. They're hugely successful and what they do clearly works for them. I can see what they do, but I can't for the life of me yet figure out why they do it on certain hands and not others. This is particularly true in the eight-board session we are about to analyze.

I did talk to someone who is a J on BBO—among the top 250 lifetime masterpoint winners—and he said that La Sota's tactics are fairly standard among robot-playing experts. For instance, he said he opens all 14HCP hands 1NT, something he doesn't routinely do with his human partners. There are obviously principles beyond that and as soon as I tumble on them, you'll be the first to know. In the meantime, if any of you have further insights into the bidding of experts like Leo LaSota and Usla when playing with robots, please, please write to me with a chat on BBO.

Board 1

On the first board, third seat, all nonvulnerable, after two passes, Usla has ♠AK932 ♥J86 ♦K8 ♣QJ10. What does he open?

1♦ is his choice? Why? As I wrote before, he makes what I call deterrence bids—bidding his short and weak suit—to deter the robots from leading or playing it. Such deterrence bids appear invariably to be in the minor suits. When he chooses to do so remains a mystery. Anyway, his passed partner bot bid 2♥ showing 4+ diamonds, rebiddable hearts, 11-HCP, 11-12 total points. So, what does Usla bid now?

Knowing that his bot partner has five hearts, usla bid.....of course, 3NT. He made 4NT for 95% when most others either languished in 1NT or some number of hearts.

The bidding and full deal:

D 1	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ 84 ♥ AQ943 ♦ 7532 ♣ A6	P	P	P	1♦
W Robot	E Robot	P	2♥	P	3NT
♠ J75 ♥ K72 ♦ J10 ♣ 98543	♠ Q106 ♥ 105 ♦ AQ964 ♣ K72	P	P	P	
	S usla	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0			
	♠ AK932 ♥ J86 ♦ K8 ♣ QJ10				

Board 2

On Board 2, vulnerable v. nonvulnerable, in second seat after a pass, Usia, has this hand: ♠KJ1098 ♥AJ7 ♦7 ♣AK94. What does he open?

If you've been paying attention, you might guess 1♦. You would be right. Why? Again, deterrence is all that occurs to me. But he doesn't do this every time. So why now? Anyway, his LHO overcalled 1♠, his bot partner made a negative double, 2♠ by RHO, back to him. He passed, only to see his bot partner bid 3♠, showing 5+ diamonds, 4+ hearts, 12+ HCP, 13+ total points. Easy to bid 3NT now.

The bidding and full deal:

D 2	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ KQ42 ♥ AQ8654 ♦ J103 ♣	1♠	X	2♠	P
W Robot	E Robot	P	3♠	P	3NT
♠ A7632 ♥ 53 ♦ KJ1032 ♣ 6	♠ Q54 ♥ 10986 ♦ 9 ♣ Q8752	P	P	P	
	S usla	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0			
	♠ KJ1098 ♥ AJ7 ♦ 7 ♣ AK94				

Usia made five by attacking spades after an opening heart lead. Making five was worth 86.84%. The vast majority were in 3NT, but others waited to attack spades, so took only 10 tricks.

Board 3

On Board 3, in first seat, nonvulnerable v. vulnerable, Usia had this hand: ♠AK ♥KJ2 ♦K3 ♣AKQ963.

Here, he and I agreed. He opened 3NT, bidding it up as Leo LaSota would, no doubt, have done. A 2♣ opener, followed by 3NT, risks a pass out when partner has as little as a queen, while 3NT looks to be odds on to make.

Turns out that partner did have a queen—the wrong one.

The full deal:

3 D	N North	W N E S
	♠ Q1065 ♥ 7653 ♦ 987 ♣ 102	P P P 3NT
W West	E East	
♠ J943 ♥ Q104 ♦ AQ62 ♣ J8	♠ 872 ♥ A98 ♦ J1054 ♣ 754	
	S South	
	♠ AK ♥ KJ2 ♦ K3 ♣ AKQ963	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

Everyone ended up in 3NT. Only 60% of the folks made it. Usla did. After a ♠ lead, Usla ran all his clubs. West was now down to three hearts and two diamonds, East had two hearts and three diamonds. What did Usla play? The ♥ K, ultimately ending playing West, making three for 67.86%.

Board 4

On Board 4, both sides vulnerable, after a pass by LHO, 3♦ by partner, and a pass by RHO, in fourth seat, Usla has ♠ KJ1052 ♥ J109 ♦ 54 ♣ AKQ. Here, he bid 3NT. I probably would have passed, since clicking my bot partner's bid reveals it has seven diamonds and 6-9 HCP. Not a running suit. I'd have received 53% for making four.

The full deal:

4 D	N North	W N E S
	♠ A ♥ 54 ♦ KQ107632 ♣ 842	P 3♦ P 3NT P P P
W West	E East	
♠ Q843 ♥ Q7632 ♦ A8 ♣ J5	♠ 976 ♥ AK8 ♦ J9 ♣ 109763	
	S South	
	♠ KJ1052 ♥ J109 ♦ 54 ♣ AKQ	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

Five persons bid 3NT. Only Usla made it for 87.50%. Others went down one or more. A couple of folks bid 3♠ over 3♦, had the bot partner go to 4♠ and received a very generous defense to allow them to make 5♠ (e.g., cashing the ♦ A and then not continuing diamonds). In 3NT, Usla received a ♠ lead as did everyone else. He then played the ♦ K, which was ducked. Then he played on spades, but when West was in with the ♠ Q, it cashed the ♦ A, but then didn't play a heart, but rather another spade. When Usla cashed the last ♠, East threw a heart, so Usla's last heart was good. It appeared to be luck, but Usla consistently gets the robots to do helpful things. Here, he knows West won't lead away from an honor in hearts and, as on Board 3, East ultimately made a useful discard.

We'll analyze the remaining four boards next week, but a couple of thoughts. Again, it's true that Usla, like LaSota, plays 3NT seemingly whenever he can. Six of the eight boards were played in 3NT. Usla and LaSota have literally played tens of thousands of deals on BBO against robots. It's clear to me that they take advantage of their deep knowledge of the robot's proclivities in both the bidding and the play. I don't think I can ever bring myself to make the deterrence bids that Usla makes, but I certainly will bid 1NT with 14HCP against robots much more often, keep track of it and let you know how I do. Remember this is all about having fun and trying new things you wouldn't do with a human partner.

Take good care and see you next week.