

Playing with Robots

Part XXXV

By pluckycat

Last week, I was talking to a friend who plays frequently with robots on BBO. He mentioned that he is a big fan of the ACBL Instant Games. I said I was too. But he said he plays exclusively in the IMP games. I thought that was interesting because, until last week, I've played almost exclusively in the ACBL Instant Masterpoint games. I had not played the Instant IMP games since early in the spring when I started playing on BBO. But I decided to try them again. Wow! All I say is I'm now hooked on the IMP games and, in the last week, played them the vast majority of time I played robot games on BBO. So, I thought this would be a good time to discuss the reasons for my newfound attraction to these IMP games as well as to describe what they are and give a number of suggestions about how one might do well at them.

In Article XVII, I described the Instant Masterpoint Games. That description is worth repeating.

- "You play 12 boards for \$1.25.
- There are IMP games and masterpoint games.
- You're dealt hands from a previous tournament that you haven't played in and your results are compared to those of 14 players in those tournaments.
- If you come in first you receive .90 ACBL masterpoints.

What I particularly like is the barometer scoring and instant feedback. Unlike in the daylongs, you know your percentage score after each hand. So, if you're having a mediocre game when the last few boards come up, you can become aggressive or conservative or neither, as is your wont, to try for a higher placement. I find that the competition is somewhat below the level of the Hartford Bridge Club, as I've been able to consistently place first or second in these games."

The same description would hold for the IMP games except that you're provided with your IMP total after every round and, as with the masterpoint games, you're also provided with your rank among the fifteen players after every round. The one item I would change in the description is that the competition I now feel is *considerably* below the level of the Hartford Bridge Club.

Candidly, I have been able to do slightly better in the Instant IMP games than in the Masterpoint games. But that's not the reason I've come to like them so much. As in team games, in the IMP games you worry more about making the contract than about overtricks. The way the scoring works in the IMP games, depending on how the field does in the contract, you either get a plus or minus score. If you score a vulnerable game that the field mostly doesn't bid or make, you can get as many as 10 IMPs. For making a slam that the field isn't in, you can get even more IMPs. To be sure, if you go down in a contract that the field is generally making, then you'll go minus a bundle of IMPs. Part-score swings earn lesser amounts of IMPs, but being plus two or three versus minus two or three can make a significant difference in your final placement.

To give you a feel for what it takes to win in an IMP game (We all know, I hope, that 70% is very good in robot masterpoint games.), in the 12 games I played last week, scores with an IMP total in the 20s won five times, in the 30s five times, in the forties once, and in the fifties once. In those 12 games, I placed first five times, second three times, third, fourth, eighth and 14th once each. The IMP game is a zero-sum contest, so those at the bottom of the 15 players score as high negatively as the winners do positively.

Some of the other reasons I like the IMP game is that I can play it more quickly than the masterpoint game. Rarely do 12 boards take more than 20 minutes. Unlike masterpoint games, I worry only a little about overtricks, but not much, because an overtrick is usually worth a little less than an IMP. Bidding and making games and slams, particularly the vulnerable ones, becomes all important, so I bid the ones that I think have a reasonable or even at times an unreasonable chance of succeeding. It's very much like team games, except that I don't have teammates I can disappoint (or make happy for that matter) so I get to be less risk adverse than when playing with teammates.

The IMP games also bring back into play all the skills one learned in bridge and left, for the most part, on the sidelines for masterpoint contests, e.g., safety plays.

So, let's look at a number of hands to see how you would have done in these Instant IMP games.

You're dealt ♠AJ54 ♥KJ862 ♦A862

You're nonvulnerable against vulnerable. Opponents are silent throughout. This is my ninth board in a round. I'm doing okay—in second place, with a total in the teens. As I mentioned, you not only get your total IMPs after every round, you also get your ranking among the 15 players. You're not told how far ahead of or behind you are compared to the player below or above you in rank. But in the Instant IMP game, I find I have a much better sense of how far ahead or behind I am because of the nature of the scoring and the fluctuation (or stableness) of my rank from board to board. As you'll see, I find all this very helpful in determining how aggressive to be. If all this seems a bit esoteric, do play an Instant IMP game. It will become delightfully clear.

Anyway, your partner opens 1♠. What do you bid?

It seemed to me that I had to splinter so I bid 4♣. Interestingly, only a third of those playing this board splintered. Many bid 4♠ directly, a terrible bid in my view. Others bid 2♥, 2♦, or 2NT. Anyway, my bot partner bid 4♠. What do you do?

Well, the hand certainly looked like it deserved a slam try, so I bid 5♦, hoping to hear a 5♥ cuebid from my bot partner. But no, it bid a discouraging 5♠. Okay, the bot has been discouraging, but I think, since it opened the hand, there has got to be a play for 6♠ so, undeterred, I bid it. Most did not, as they took the opener's discouragement to heart and rested in game. Three others bid slam, but they went down.

The full deal:

D	N Robot ♠ Q10962 ♥ 95 ♦ 3 ♣ AKJ42	W	N 1♣ P 4♣ P 5♣ P P	E P P P	S 4♣ 5♦ 6♣
W Robot ♠ 87 ♥ A74 ♦ KQ975 ♣ 1063		E Robot ♠ K3 ♥ Q103 ♦ J104 ♣ Q9875			
	S pluckycat ♠ AJ54 ♥ KJ862 ♦ A862 ♣				6♣ N NS: 0 EW: 0

I got the favorable lead of a low club; the ♠K was onside doubleton; I guessed to play the ♥J driving out the ♥A; and I made six for +11.86 IMPs. The three who went down in slam got 8.43 IMPs. Was it a risky bid by me? No doubt, but I try to come in first (winning the team game in my mind) and felt I needed to make things happen. One of the things that's attractive about IMP games is that, unlike masterpoints, in which every board in a 12-board round is worth 8 1/3%, in the IMP game, on a single board, you can make nearly half the total you need to win. Two or three really good boards may be all it takes to win if you just hold your own on the rest.

In this same round, the 12th and last board comes up. I'm chugging along and now have in the low 20s when this hand comes along, fourth seat after three passes, all nonvulnerable.

You're dealt ♠A95 ♥Q6 ♦AKQJ32 ♣AJ. What do you bid?

It's a hand that has great playing strength. How do you best convey that to partner? Some opened 1♦. A terrible bid in my view. Others opened 2NT, only slight better. Several opened it 2♣ and followed with 2NT. Well, my reasoning, for better or worse, was that I had eight sure tricks and good prospects for a ninth. I certainly didn't want to risk being passed in 1♦ and I figured I needed a good board to assure a win. So, I checked to see what 3NT would tell my bot partner—strong hand, 25-27HCP. A bit of a redundant description, but I get the point. It suits my playing strength and if partner has 8-9HCPs and takes me to 6NT, I should have a play for it.

Sure enough. That's what my bot partner did with 9 HCP. It bid 6NT.

The full deal:

	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ K632	P	P	P	3NT
	♥ A7	P	6NT	P	P
	♦ 964	P			
	♣ Q1092				
W Robot		E Robot			
♠ Q87		♠ J104			
♥ K1082		♥ J9543			
♦ 1085		♦ 7			
♣ 853		♣ K764			
	S pluckycat				
	♠ A95				
	♥ Q6				
	♦ AKQJ32				
	♣ AJ				
		6NT S	NS: 0	EW: 0	

I got a low diamond lead and it was easy enough then to develop three clubs tricks, six diamonds, two spades and one heart for 12 tricks. I scored 11.86 IMPs again to get to 33 IMPs and a clear victory over the second-place person with 24 IMPs. On the last board, a couple of others reached 6♦, making, for 10.71 IMPs. Most of the other players subsided in 3NT and got minus-one IMP.

The remaining five hands all come from a single 12-board tournament, the most recent one I played.

This is the first board of that round.

Your partner in first seat, both nonvulnerable, opens 1♦. Your RHO overcalls 1♠. You hold ♠QJ ♥10 ♦QJ85 ♣AK8764. I bid 2♣. LHO raises to 3♠, preemptive (showing 4+♠) and your bot partner now bids 4♦, showing twice rebiddable ♦s (at least a six-card suit). Pass to you.

What do you bid?

Well, my thinking was that partner can't have much. But then again it doesn't need much for slam. I am fairly sure it has a singleton spade. It can't have much in clubs. It can certainly have the ♦A and the ♦K and the ♥A. It's the first board. If I go down, I can recover. If I succeed, I'm well ahead for the round. I bid 6♦.

The full deal:

D		N Robot	W	N	E	S
		♠ 9	1♦	1♠	2♣	
		♥ AKJ4	3♠	4♦	P	6♦
		♦ A96432	P	P	P	
		♣ 93				
W Robot			E Robot			
♠ 87543			♠ AK1062			
♥ Q852			♥ 9763			
♦ K			♦ 107			
♣ Q52			♣ J10			
		S pluckycat				
		♠ QJ				
		♥ 10				
		♦ QJ85				
		♣ AK8764				
			6♦ N	NS: 0 EW: 0		

Not quite what I envisioned. But certainly, good enough to have a play for 6♦. Sure enough, luck is with me. I do maintain that, when playing against robots, you're often given a play for a slam or a game. In other words, slams and games appear to me to come in much more frequently against the odds than one would expect. Often robots also mis-defend these hands in a way humans wouldn't. So, no guarantees, but aggressiveness seems to pay off in the Instant IMP game much more often than in the Instant Matchpoint game, particularly with regard to bidding games and slams—which suits me just fine.

Sure enough, the ♦K is onside singleton and there's nothing to the play. Clubs are 3-2 and easily established with one ruff. No one else is in the slam and bidding and making starts me +11.43.

On the next two boards, I go positive for a few IMPs each.

On the fourth board, both vulnerable, I drew ♠Q64 ♥6 ♦AQ52 ♣AKQ98.

In fourth seat, I opened 1♣, planning to reverse. I had enough and, after the reverse, my bot partner would be able to tell me if we have enough for game. It bid 1♥ and I bid, as planned, 2♦. It then bid 3♦, showing "4+♦, 4+♥, 8-12 HCP, forcing to 3NT." I took note of the 8-12 HCP, not the usual total points, and speedily bid 3NT. Most of the field was in 3NT. Only one other reversed; most bid 2NT after 1♥, an inferior bid I believe. Several bid 1NT after 1♥, an insane bid, and they rested there. However, they went plus 2 or 3 IMPs, because most of the field was going down in 3NT. Have I ever mentioned one of the great things I like in bridge—insanity on occasion pays off; the wheel of fortune stops on your number.

The full deal:

D	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ A93 ♥ AJ32 ♦ 9763 ♣ 54	P	P	P	1♣
W Robot		P	1♥	P	2♦
♠ K7 ♥ 10985 ♦ 84 ♣ J10732		P	3♦	P	3NT
	E Robot	P	P	P	
	♠ J10852 ♥ KQ74 ♦ KJ10 ♣ 6				
	S pluckycat				
	♠ Q64 ♥ 6 ♦ AQ52 ♣ AKQ98				
		3NT S		NS: 0 EW: 0	

I received a low heart lead. Plan the play, looking at only the N-S hands.

Where is your 9th trick going to come from? Hopefully clubs, but what if not?

I ducked the heart to East's ♥Q. The ♠J came back, which I ducked. Remember, as I've often said, good things often happen in robot play when you duck. After the ♠J held, the ♠8 was led—an interesting card. If the ♠10 had been led, I'd have an automatic cover with the ♠9 in dummy. Robots ordinarily don't lead away from Kings and Queens and I backed that judgment and ducked again. Sure enough, West had to play the ♠K. So now I started diamonds and, with the ♦K onside and diamonds 3-2, I had nine tricks. As I feared, clubs were 5-1 and most of those in 3NT went down because they played the ♠Q at their first opportunity. Only two others players bid and made 3NT. I received 9.71 IMPs.

I picked up 15 IMPs over the next four boards, with 8.1 IMPs coming from setting a vulnerable game contract that others allowed to make. So now I'm at 40 IMPs with four boards to go, record territory for me.

Alas, on the next board, the opponents played 1NTx and my bot and I choose the wrong line of defense, allowing it to make, for -7.43 IMPs. If we had set it several tricks, as others did, I would have received +9.5 IMPs, a net loss of 17 IMPs. An opportunity squandered.

I will show screenshots of the last three interesting and instructive boards and discuss them briefly because this article is already long enough.

Board 10:

	N Robot ♠ K10765 ♥ AQ7 ♦ J84 ♣ 86	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>W</th> <th>N</th> <th>E</th> <th>S</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td>P</td> <td>1NT</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2♣</td> <td>2♥</td> <td>P</td> <td>2♠</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>3NT</td> <td>P</td> <td>4♠</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	W	N	E	S			P	1NT	2♣	2♥	P	2♠	P	3NT	P	4♠	P	P	P	
	W	N	E	S																		
			P	1NT																		
2♣	2♥	P	2♠																			
P	3NT	P	4♠																			
P	P	P																				
W Robot ♠ 8 ♥ J1082 ♦ AQ9765 ♣ QJ	E Robot ♠ Q32 ♥ 54 ♦ 103 ♣ A109532																					
S pluckycat ♠ AJ94 ♥ K963 ♦ K2 ♣ K74	4♠ S NS: 0 EW: 0																					

You will note I opened this hand 1NT with 14HCP. As I've said previously, I've become a big fan of doing so and have gotten very good results with it. Here, I ended up playing 4♠, while others who opened 1♣ ended up being dummy. I received the ♣Q lead, taken by the ♣A, followed by a diamond to the ♦Q, then the ♦A. Now, a third diamond, and here the bot defenders fell from grace, when East trumped with the ♠2, overruffed by me. Now the outstanding spades are 2-1 and 4♠ makes easily. Played from the other side, however, those declarers received a different defense and had to guess the spades and play for them to be 2-2—down 1. I received 9.75 IMPs when only one other player bid and made 4♠. Many did not reach game.

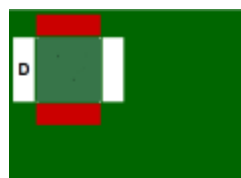
Board 11:

	N Robot ♠ Q73 ♥ J9 ♦ A1092 ♣ 8764	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>W</th> <th>N</th> <th>E</th> <th>S</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td>P</td> <td>1♣</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>1NT</td> <td>P</td> <td>3NT</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	W	N	E	S			P	1♣		1NT	P	3NT	P	P	P	
	W	N	E	S														
			P	1♣														
	1NT	P	3NT															
P	P	P																
W Robot ♠ 10652 ♥ 1043 ♦ QJ873 ♣ 10	E Robot ♠ K4 ♥ KQ872 ♦ K6 ♣ J532																	
S pluckycat ♠ AJ98 ♥ A65 ♦ 54 ♣ AKQ9	3NT N NS: 0 EW: 0																	

I continued my aggressive bidding and leapt to 3NT. I thought I would have a reasonable play for game even if my dummy had close to a minimum. I also sensed that if I bid 2NT, my bot might well pass. Anyway, I received a favorable lead of a low heart, which rode around to the ♥J. Now I had

two spades, two hearts, a diamond and four clubs, when the play of the first two clubs allowed me to go to the board to take the marked finesse. Only one other player bid 3NT (most did rest in 2NT) and that other player went down when he failed to take the marked finesse in clubs (did I say that the level of play was well below that of the Hartford Bridge Club). I received 8.21 IMPs.

Board 12:

	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ Q9 ♥ AJ10765 ♦ 8 ♣ K842	1♦	1♥	1♠	4♥
		P	P	P	
W Robot		E Robot			
♠ A108 ♥ 98 ♦ AQ76 ♣ Q963		♠ K6532 ♥ 42 ♦ J1093 ♣ 75			
	S pluckycat				
	♠ J74 ♥ KQ3 ♦ K542 ♣ AJ10				
		4♥ N NS: 0 EW: 0			

Here, I knew I should cue bid or make a support double, but it was the last board and I was IMPatient. Given the adverse bidding, I bid what I thought we could make. We were vulnerable and I really do not want to miss vulnerable games. And here, I thought game could well be available with my bot and I didn't think it would be in NT given the adverse bidding. So right or wrong, I bit the bullet and bid 4♥.

I received a low club lead and all my problems were over. Hearts, as you see, were 2-2 and if need be, I could have ruffed the fourth club in dummy. Nearly half the field didn't bid 4♥ and, of those who did, several misplayed the hand to go down, mostly by not preserving their third trump in dummy. I received 7.43 IMPs for bidding and making 4♥.

So my total was 58 IMPs, a new high and, had I done better on board 9, I could have been at 75. Oh well, a good goal to shoot for in the future.

Talking about the future, I'm sure there will be more IMP games in mine. And I hope there will be some in yours. They really do have a lot to recommend them. In the meantime, I hope you're enjoying a safe and healthy holiday season.