

Playing with Robots

Part XIV

By pluckycat

Last week, I said I'd return to an analysis of how the robots are doing playing in HBC games. I played against them on July 1 and they only scored 50%. An analysis of that game shows that the robots still are formidable opponents. They typically played very good defense, averaging above 70% on the 5 boards in which their defense could have an effect. Their declarer play was generally very good, garnering one top and several near tops.

However, like so often for us humans when we score below our expectations, they happened to run into more than their share of good play and good bidding by their opponents during the round. They also didn't get the usual number of misplays by opponents. And they had a little bad luck on a few hands in which bad distribution reared its head. Interestingly, they chose not to open a 9 HCP, 5-6-2-0 hand (for a result of 36%) when almost everyone else opened the hand for a good result. Again, unusual hands, as is true for most of us, seem to cause difficulties for the robots.

Finally, they sold out in a couple of competitive auctions when they shouldn't have. Once, a sacrifice in 5♦ was clear and taken by most of the field and, on another deal, they should have competed to 4♥. The round showed that robots can be aggressive in non-competitive auctions and sometimes, but not always, overly cautious in competitive ones. Nonetheless, all in all, a fairly good performance. As usual, there were several instructive hands. Below are two of them.

Sitting East-West, non-vulnerable v. vulnerable, the robots bid as follows:

E	S	W	N
P	P	2♣	P
2♦	P	2♥	P
3♦	P	3♠	P
4♠	P	P	P

The E-W hands: W ♠AK106 ♥AKJ53 ♦73 ♣AK, E ♠875 ♥8 ♦Q1098652 ♣Q2

The bidding reveals sophistication and good judgment. The robots were the only ones in 4♠. Almost everyone else with these hands landed in 3NT, an inferior contract. Unfortunately for the robots, spades split 5-1 and hearts split 5-2, with the long spades with the short hearts. Down two, while most hands in 3NT were also down two. Had the spades or hearts broken reasonably, 4♠ is down one at worst and may even make. In 3NT, however, declarer will never see dummy and is likely, at best, to take 7 tricks.

On this next hand, the robots ran into harmful distribution in the opponents' hands and paid a price. Only one declarer in seven found the winning line. Another was aided by a defensive miscue. Hard to say the robots fell from grace on this hand, although they had the opportunity to find the winning line

The bidding with only E-W vulnerable:

E	S	W	N
P	P	1♠	2♥
P	2NT	P	3♥
P	P	3♠	P
4♠	X	P	P
P			

The East-West Hands: W ♠K108752 ♥10 ♦AKJ1076 ♣, E ♠93 ♥K9843 ♦53 ♣AQ74

A couple of comments on the bidding before we get to the play. Note that West fully appreciated its offensively powerful 6-6 distribution and continued to 3♠ despite the NT bid by South. Now East, with some useful cards, the ♥K behind the heart bidder, the AQ of clubs and a doubleton to go with its partner's (at least) six-card suit continued, rightfully in my view, to 4♠.

The North-South hands: N ♠6 ♥AQJ765 ♦42 ♣KJ96, S ♠AQJ4 ♥3 ♦Q98 ♣108532

Against the robots, North led a low ♣. Dummy took the ♣A and declarer discarded its singleton heart. Now the robot can avoid four losers despite South's trump holding as long as it starts diamonds first. South can always tap declarer by leading a heart or clubs. The robot, however, led the ♠9, covered by the ♠J and taken by the ♠K. He then led the ♦A and followed by leading the ♠10, taken by South's ♠Q. A low heart was returned and trumped. The ♦K was led, followed by the ♦10 taken by South's queen. A club back was ruffed by declarer, but to avoid continuing to be tapped and losing control, declarer led another diamond, ruffed by the ♠4 with the ♠A still to come -- for down one.

Five of seven pairs who were in 4♠ went down, and one who made it did so because of a defensive miscue described later. Four pairs led the ♥A and three pairs led a low club. After a club lead, one declarer found the winning line: ♣A, pitching the ♥10. Then the AK of diamonds, another diamond, ruffed by North with the ♠6 and overruffed with the ♠9 in dummy. A low spade was led back and South couldn't take more than three spade tricks, no matter what he did.

At the only other table where 4♠ made, the ♥A was led and then North faced a tough problem. Another heart was led despite her partner's double and knowing that partner and declarer were out of hearts. South now may think he could ruff with impunity the K♥ played by East or may have just thought that he needed to ruff the winner in dummy to prevent a discard. In any event, he ruffed with the ♠4, was overruffed by declarer and that was curtains for the defense. Declarer

then mimicked the other successful declarer and proceeded to play the AK of diamonds, followed by another diamond, overruffing North's ♠6 with dummy's nine. Then declarer led a low spade and South was only going to get two spade tricks, his ♠AQJ now being in front of the ♠K10872. After the ♥A lead, as long as South doesn't ruff in front of declarer, the contract will go down as declarer cannot avoid three spade losers (it's interesting to try all the possibilities, one of which results in declarer being endplayed in trump). A very interesting hand showing that the robots are only human.

Before you think that the robots are not formidable opponents, you may want to ask those in the O-200 HBC game, in which they scored 81.17% (not a misprint) on July 9. I don't have access to the hands from that game, but a review of the results shows that the robots invariably bid and played the hands in optimum fashion on the 12 of 18 hands in which they were declarers (the cards were running E-W that day). When defending, they also achieved tops or near tops, punishing particularly those who overreached by playing sound defense. It's not surprising that the robots would do well in a novice game (they scored 67.82% two days later in another O-200 game). As we've seen, they generally bid and play soundly. I'll return at some point to continue to analyze how robots do in HBC games, but enough for now.

Last weekend and Monday, I competed in the NABC Three Session (24 boards a session) Individual against robots. I thought it was a good way to test what I'd learned about playing with robots. Not surprisingly, there were lots of new lessons to be learned and several old lessons to relearned. We'll look at them next week.