

Playing with Robots

Part XXXIX

By pluckycat

There are many delights in playing with robots. One of them is conceiving a strategy that gives you a chance to succeed because you now have played enough against the robots to recognize patterns and take advantage of them.

This week, I'll look at four of my favorite hands from last week. Why are they favorites? Because I took some risks in two of them and the risks paid off. In the other two, my old friend leftfoot (See Article XXVIII.) was up to his usual shenanigans, playing in the same daylong tournament as I did. He succeeded handsomely. These tactics are ones well worth taking notice of and adopting when you see the opportunity to do so.

On the first hand, your side is nonvulnerable v. vulnerable. You pick up ♠K ♥AKQ965 ♦J1076 ♣104. Your partner opens 1♦, you respond 1♥, your partner bids 1♠. There are risks, and I'm not vulnerable, but I still feel there has to be a play for game here. And as you know, in an IMP robot game, if I think there's a shot at making game, I'm going to bid it. No use fooling around because a fourth-suit forcing bid here isn't likely to prevent a club lead, so I bid 4♥. Dummy came down with ♠Q1094 ♥J73 ♦AQ82 ♣QJ.

The ♦5 was led.

Uh Oh. I may have stepped in it here. Looks like four losers because almost certainly the lead indicates the ♦K is offside. Robots almost never lead away from honors. The lead also could be a singleton. What to do?

I decided to take my one chance. I know that robots don't like to capture air with their Aces. So, if East has the ♠A I have a chance. I won with the ♦A and, now, don't want to appear too anxious about spades. Not sure it makes a difference, but I credit the robot with some intelligence and an immediate lead of a low spade from dummy may arouse its suspicion in the simulations it runs to decide its defense. In any event, I came to my hand with a trump to the ♥A and then back to the ♥J. West showed out of hearts so I couldn't draw the last outstanding trump and get back to dummy to lead a spade. I had to lead a spade right away. So, I did. As I hoped, East ducked and I took my singleton ♠K. I gave myself the only legitimate chance I had and it succeeded. Lots of folks in my cohort bid 4♥, but only I and one other player made it. Making was worth 8.36 IMPs. Going down one was worth -2.93 IMPs. Those who went down gave up and didn't give themselves a chance—an obvious chance, at that, if you know the robots' proclivities.

The full deal:

D	N Robot	W N E S
	♠ Q1094 ♥ J73 ♦ AQ82 ♣ QJ	1♠ P 1♥ P 1♦ P 1♣ P 1♠ P 1♥ P 1♦ P 1♣ P
W Robot	E Robot	
♠ J653 ♥ 2 ♦ 54 ♣ K98752	♠ A872 ♥ 1084 ♦ K93 ♣ A63	
	S pluckycat	
	♠ K ♥ AKQ965 ♦ J1076 ♣ 104	4♥ S NS: 0 EW: 0

Those faithful readers of these articles know that I've been beating this drum for a while now: **open 14-point balanced hands 1NT**. The following deal involves a scenario that arises with considerable frequency.

The full deal:

D	N Robot	W N E S
	♠ 1074 ♥ QJ54 ♦ Q ♣ AJ1094	P 2♣ P 1NT P 2♣ P P 3NT P P P
W Robot	E Robot	
♠ 86 ♥ 987 ♦ J954 ♣ K865	♠ K952 ♥ K63 ♦ A1062 ♣ Q2	
	S pluckycat	
	♠ AQJ3 ♥ A102 ♦ K873 ♣ 73	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

I opened 1NT and, after a Stayman sequence, my robot put me in 3NT. Only one other person bid 3NT and she also made 4 for +5.83 IMPs. Almost every other pair opened 1♦, heard 1♥ in response, bid 1♠ and then passed after their robot bid 1NT. Making three, typically for -1.93 MPs. Readers of these articles know better. I'm reminded of the Pete Seeger song, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" and the repeated lyric "Oh, when will they ever learn? Oh, when will they ever learn?" I do want to note that opening 1NT with 14 HCP doesn't work all the time, but based on my experience and what I've seen with others who employ it, it works often enough to make it worth trying every time.

The next two hands are from leftfoot's arsenal.

Here he holds, first seat, both not vulnerable, ♠KQJ95 ♥J86 ♦A105 ♣K6.

Is there any doubt in your mind? He opened 1NT of course. Dummy responded 3NT.

The full deal:

	N North		W N E S
	♠ A64		P 3NT P P
	♥ 543		P P
	♦ KQ982		
	♣ 104		
W West		E East	
♠ 3		♠ 10872	
♥ KQ97		♥ A102	
♦ J743		♦ 6	
♣ A975		♣ QJ832	
	S South		
	♠ KQJ95		
	♥ J86		
	♦ A105		
	♣ K6		
			3NT S NS:0 EW:0

Not at all surprisingly to me, leftfoot received a favorable lead. Robots on such auctions are programmed, correctly in my view, to lead majors and not to give away tricks from holdings like ♥KQ behind declarer. With nothing more to guide it, and certainly no clue that leftfoot had a five-card spade suit, our robot led its singleton spade. leftfoot quickly took his 10 tricks and, as the only one making a game, gained 10.86 IMPs since everyone else either went down in 4♠ or allowed the opponents to make a club partial—all for negative scores,

On the next board, leftfoot picked up, in fourth seat, vulnerable v. not vulnerable, ♠ -- ♥AKQ32 ♦KJ742 ♣K94. What does he bid?

Easy enough—he bid 1♥ of course. Oops, no, of course not.

He bid 4♥. Passed out. He was the only one taking the direct route to 4♥. Others got there, but only after bidding diamonds on the way. We'll see the effect that had on the robots' defense in a minute. Can we intuit leftfoot's rationale? He's fourth seat with 16 HCP. Equally dividing the other 24 HCPs leaves his partner with eight. Even if his partner has a few less HCPs, the combined hands should have a play for game in 4♥ even if his bot has only a small doubleton. Further, leftfoot appears to believe, as I do, that he should bid game at IMPs at every good opportunity and that hiding the nature of his hand is worth the risk of bidding 4♥ directly. Finally, there's the concern that the opponents may find their spade fit and find a good sacrifice as well.

The full deal:

	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ Q543		P	P	P 4♥
	♥ 74		P	P	P
	♦ 1053				
	♣ QJ75				
W Robot		E Robot			
♠ A962		♠ KJ1087			
♥ J85		♥ 1096			
♦ AQ96		♦ 8			
♣ 108		♣ A632			
	S leftfoot				
	♠ -				
	♥ AKQ32				
	♦ KJ742				
	♣ K94				
		4♥ S			NS: 0 EW: 0

leftfoot received the ♠A lead, which he ruffed and promptly led a club to the ♣Q, won by East with the ♣A. East then returned its singleton diamond. West won with the ♦Q and then, not having seen leftfoot bid diamonds, returned a club. Curtains for the defense here. At the majority of other tables, East, having heard South bid diamonds, won the ♦Q and then cashed the ♦A and gave East a ruff—down one. Leftfoot garnered 11.89 IMPs for making 4♥ while others scored - 1.11.

What's to be gleaned from these two hands? Clearly, leftfoot's aim is to give the robots as little information as possible and to hide the nature of his hand. It most often pays off handsomely. Robots, you'll remember, run simulations to determine their defense. Garbage in, garbage out. The robots clearly expected leftfoot to have different hands than he did and based their defense on that.

leftfoot, as you'll remember, is among the top point getters lifetime on BBO. In this particular daylong tournament, he was 2nd out of 461 players with a total of 57.61 IMPs. His success on these hands, and in general, cannot be considered a fluke. You and I may not see the opportunities leftfoot sees, but the notion of deceiving the robots when you can or giving them little or no information when you can is clearly something to be kept in the forefront of your robot bidding philosophy. When playing with a human partner, you usually take pains to try to make sure he or she knows what you have as the bidding duet advances. With robot partners, there's no such obligation. A few, like leftfoot, are far better at exploiting that difference than others.

Stay safe and healthy and see you next week.