

Playing with Robots

Part XXXVIII

By pluckycat

This week, I was in search of hands that were particularly instructive; hands that illustrated key lessons about how to play successfully with robots and that involved some nuances we haven't visited much, if at all. Recently, I played in one of BBO's ACBL daylong 12-board tournaments for \$1.35. I've come to like playing in them because the reward for doing really well—a top of 1.5 masterpoints versus a top of .9 for the Instant tournaments—is attractive. True, you need to be in the top five out of usually 500 participants to get those 1.5 points, but section tops in the daylongs reward .9 and that's as doable as being first in an Instant tournament. Anyway, I did okay—plus 20 IMPs for second place in my section—but nothing to write home about or, in fact, to write here about. So, I reviewed the boards played by the winner of the tournament, who was plus 53 IMPs, roughly the equivalent of a 75% matchpoint game. This week, I analyze the winner's best three hands, on which he earned nearly two-thirds of his total IMPs.

The first board our winner picked up, third hand, both nonvulnerable, was ♠AKQ876 ♥93 ♦A7 ♣J62. His robot partner passed and RHO bid 1♦. He overcalled 1♠. Double by LHO showed 4+♥ and 5+HCP. Partner passed. RHO bid 1NT. So, the bidding was:

W	N	E	S
	P	1♦	1♠
X	P	1NT	?

Here, I suspect most would be tempted to bid 2♠. But this is IMPs, your partner is likely to be close to broke so no game is available, and East's 1NT bid showed a likely stopper in spades, which can only be J10xx. Further, an immediate bid of 2♠ exaggerates the strength of your hand. There's no good reason to be anxious to bid 2♠, so our hero passed. He heard 2♦, which was described as a retreat from NT with 4+♥ and 4+♦. It's correct to surmise that West had a singleton spade. The auction was passed back to our fellow, who now bid 2♠, risking going down 2 for -300 if doubled, but perhaps having a play for 2♠, even if doubled. But he hasn't misled his robot partner about his strength—a key to this hand. Sure enough, East doubled, which ended the auction. Dummy came down with ♠54 ♥8742 ♦1094 ♣A854. He received the ♠3 lead, on which East played the ♠9 and he won with the ♠A.

Plan the play.

The key to the play is not to draw another trump, but to recognize that you want to make all of your trump. Six spades and two Aces are all you need. So, you next play, as our fellow did, a small heart and then lead hearts and diamonds at every opportunity and take your ruffs when those suits are continued. East cannot effectively lead spades because of your spots.

The full deal:

<p>D</p>		<p>N North</p> <p>♠ 54 ♥ 8742 ♦ 1094 ♣ A854</p>	<table border="1"> <tr><td>W</td><td>N</td><td>E</td><td>S</td></tr> <tr><td>P</td><td>1♦</td><td>1♠</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>X</td><td>P</td><td>1NT</td><td>P</td></tr> <tr><td>2♦</td><td>P</td><td>P</td><td>2♣</td></tr> <tr><td>P</td><td>P</td><td>X</td><td>P</td></tr> </table>	W	N	E	S	P	1♦	1♠		X	P	1NT	P	2♦	P	P	2♣	P	P	X	P
W	N	E	S																				
P	1♦	1♠																					
X	P	1NT	P																				
2♦	P	P	2♣																				
P	P	X	P																				
<p>W West</p> <p>♠ 3 ♥ Q1065 ♦ KJ83 ♣ Q1093</p>		<p>E East</p> <p>♠ J1092 ♥ AKJ ♦ Q652 ♣ K7</p>																					
	<p>S South</p> <p>♠ AKQ876 ♥ 93 ♦ A7 ♣ J62</p>		<p>2♦ S NS: 0 EW: 0</p>																				

What's particularly noteworthy about this deal is that our fellow's pass ultimately induced the bot to think that a double would be profitable. The bot knew it had the balance of power and spades were not running. Not good enough, however, to beat 2♠. Our hero collected 11 IMPs as he tied for top among the 30 who played the hand. Most of the 30 had negative scores including a half dozen who misplayed 2♠x to go down one by drawing trump. Those who took immediate action over 1NT by bidding 2♠ induced their opponents to bid 3♦ (4♦ makes) and their bot partner to bid 3♠ over 3♦ for a bad result, particularly when doubled. The immediate 2♠ bid over 1NT showed 6+♠ and 17 HCPs, inducing the North bot to think it could bid on with its ♣A.

On the second board for analysis, third hand vulnerable versus not, our stalwart held ♠A9 ♥A4 ♦AKQJ ♣K8743.

What to open?

Not surprisingly, there was divergence among the 30 persons in the cohort confronted by these cards. Many opened 2NT, one wayward soul opened a club, and a number opened, as I would have, 2♣. This is a hand with lots of promise. Opponents are silent throughout. Your robot partner responds 2NT. This shows 2-5♣, 2-5♦, 2-4♥ and 2-4♠, 8-11 HCP and 12- total points. I will say flatly that whenever my robot gives a positive response to 2♣, I think some slam will have play.

What do you bid now? Our hero, who had opened 2♣, now bid 3♣ showing 5+♣, 19+ HCP, 23+ total points. His bot now Blackwooded in clubs, showing nothing more or different by doing so than it had shown with its previous bid.

What do you do now? Show your key cards? Three in 30 showed their key cards by bidding 5♣ and ended up in 6♣. Our hero bid 6NT and ignored the Blackwood ask. The key here is to recognize

that slam should be bid and that it is likely to succeed. But only four of 30 bid the slam. Most ended in 3NT making five or six and received negative IMPs.

The full deal:

	N Robot ♠ KQ10 ♥ J102 ♦ 43 ♣ QJ965	W N E S P P P 2♣ P 2NT P 3♣ P 4NT P 6NT P P P
	W Robot ♠ J6432 ♥ KQ865 ♦ 92 ♣ 2	E Robot ♠ 875 ♥ 973 ♦ 108765 ♣ A10
	S dracheeins ♠ A9 ♥ A4 ♦ AKQJ ♣ K8743	6NT N NS: 0 EW: 0

6♣ is a better contract. Against 6♣, the ♥ K was led, but a heart can immediately be discarded on a spade. Twelve tricks are there for the taking—3♠, 1♥, 4♦ and 4♣. In 6NT, our hero needed to avoid a heart lead, which he did. The extra IMP he earned for 6NT—11.86 IMPs versus 10.83 IMPs for 6♣—wasn't worth the risk, in my view. Perhaps he thought 6NT was a safer contract, but it's hard to see why on the bidding. Always good to be lucky.

The third hand is one in which several key choices arise during the bidding, so here's the bidding and the deal in full:

The full deal:

	N North ♠ Q82 ♥ 97642 ♦ 3 ♣ K864	W N E S X P 1♠ 2♠ P 3♣ 2♠ 3♣ X P 4♥ P P X P P
	W West ♠ J ♥ A853 ♦ KJ96 ♣ Q952	E East ♠ AK10975 ♥ KJ10 ♦ 852 ♣ 7
	S South ♠ 643 ♥ Q ♦ AQ1074 ♣ AJ103	4♥ E NS: 0 EW: 0

Our hero had the South hand and his first bid of 2♦ is one almost all of us would agree with (some players bid an unusual 2NT, but that seems to me less good, even at favorable vulnerability). It's a standard overcall. The 3♣ bid, however, deserves more scrutiny. Here, what our stalwart was telling his robot partner was that he had 5+♦, 4+♣ and 18 total points, a distinct exaggeration, but one that, if you do make it, should only be done at favorable vulnerability. If he'd passed, the opponents would have ended up in 4♠, usually making five for -5.68 imps to N-S. Half the field

ended up in 4♠ when South's only bid in the auction was the 2♦ overcall. Nonetheless, although it worked out favorably here, what often happens when you lie to your robot partner happened here. With a few assets, North felt it wise to put the contract in 4♣, which South had to bid. The 3♠ bid by North showed 4+♣ and 6+ total points and was forcing. In this circumstance, there's no choice but to bid 4♣. Even when there is a choice, I've found that if your robot makes a forcing bid, you ignore it most often at your peril. 4♣ is certain to go down and it was rightly doubled. It would most likely have gone down three for -500. Still, that's significantly better than the opposition making 4♠, saving at least 3 IMPs. And, of course, the poor benighted robot in the East seat took out the double and bid 4♥ instead of 4♠. Our hero was wise enough to pass (one poor soul bid 5♣ over 4♥, was promptly doubled, and went for -800). And then he passed again when his robot doubled. So, another bit of advice gained from too many unfortunate experiences—when your bot doubles a high-level contract, unless your hand contains exceptional assets or deficits your bot might not know about, trust your robot. Its penalty doubles are made rarely and, as I've said, usually to good effect. Here 4♥x went for -500, a club, a diamond, 2 diamond ruffs, and a heart, and our guy earned 11.92 IMPs.

Lots of takeaways from these hands, but the principal one remains—boldness, with an appreciation of the situational dynamics, e.g., vulnerable versus not—pays off in IMP robot play.

One footnote about why I like playing against robots. You don't get the nonsense you sometimes get when playing against humans. A case in point was this week when I played in an 18-board ACBL tournament on BBO. After relatively straightforward bidding, my partner bid 3NT and I passed. My LHO clicked on my pass and asked me to explain. I was stumped. But politely I said in explanation, "I am content to be in game and therefore have nothing further to say." Not satisfied, he asked for further explanation. Astounded, and by now more than slightly miffed, I said, "I have no further explanation." He persisted. I stopped responding and fortunately the round soon ended. His nonsensical persistence may have had something to do with the previous board on which I'd made (with 2 overtricks) a 1NT contract he had doubled when he misdefended. Robots may misdefend but they do not misbehave.

And speaking about what I consider misbehavior—the new ACBL procedures, among many other things, state that bidding in tempo, should take no longer than 10 seconds. Too often my human opponents take more than 10 seconds and then pass, often in obvious passing situations. Hopefully, the new procedures will stop much of this. Robots, bless them, rarely take more than 10 nanoseconds to bid.

See you next week. Stay safe and healthy.