Playing with Robots

Part XVII

By pluckycat

After nearly a week without, it's beyond nice to have electric power and the internet again. But it gave me a week to reflect (at least somewhat) on playing bridge on BBO with robots. I'm really disappointed that BBO has abandoned the daylong $.39 Robot World games that were extremely challenging, including my favorite, "Just Declare." These drew more than 1000 participants daily. So now, we have the ACBL World daylong options: four 12-board masterpoint games and one imp game at $1.35, one daylong 18-board game at $1.95 and the Daylong Support Your Club 18-board game for $6. I don't know why the $.39 games in Robot World were abandoned, but can only speculate that larger profits are available in the ACBL World $1.35 games and, given the limited options, those games have been attracting more participants. So, I've been playing more ACBL Instant games. Today, we'll review a recent game and see how you would have fared on key hands.

But first, a review of the attractions of ACBL Instant Games:

- 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 with, as you will see, less than optimum effort at times.

The following hands were particularly challenging in a session in which I didn't play particularly well (rust from the weeklong layoff, I'd like to think), but eked out a second place at 56.25% (.63 masterpoints). The first two hands were part scores that seemed ordinary, but yielded 64% combined. Next, as South, I picked up, nonvulnerable v. vulnerable, ♠3 ♥KQJ2 ♦108 ♣AKQ954. I opened a club and it seemed right to bid one heart after East doubled. The bidding progressed:

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♦	Dbl	1♥
1♠	P	P	2♣
P	P	2♠	3♣
3♠	P	P	4♣
P	P	4♠	P
P	Dbl	P	??

What now? I'm now sorry I bid over 3♠. Would you have? It seemed like the right thing, as one general principle I have when playing with robots is to play the hand whenever I reasonably can. I also checked my bids and they were well within the range of what I had — 17-18 total points, with 5+ clubs and four+ hearts. Here, nonvulnerable v. vulnerable, that seemed a good bid. But maybe not. My robot may think I'm at the top of that range in high points. Who knows what truly goes on in its mind? Now I'm trapped. I think about 5♣, but fear it will go for a bundle, even more than four spades doubled making. (I am partly right; it goes down four for -800, but does get 36%.) So, I huddle, curse my heartless robot and ultimately pass hoping for the best. No such luck. Making five for -990. Opponents have a singleton heart and singleton club and cross ruff to beat the band. I received 14%. Letting 3♠ play and make 5 would have been 64%. I need to remember that, in competitive auctions, robots sometimes take you to places you don't want to be.

On the next board, everyone is vulnerable and partner opens 1♦. You hold ♠K107 ♥AKJ10 ♣QJ8743. What would you bid?

I bid 1♥ — best chance to get the majors in play. Opponents passed throughout. Partner bid 2♦, showing twice rebiddable diamonds and 11-15 HCP. Now what do you bid? I worry about entries to dummy, but think, what's the point of bidding 3♣? So, I bid 3NT, thinking, at worst, I can probably scramble for nine tricks and again making sure to show what I have, namely 14-21 HCP and stoppers in spades and clubs as well as hearts. Partner robot, not at all worried about any angina it may cause me, bid 6♦. I thought for a second about bidding 6NT but then said to self, "Don't be crazy," and passed. Coming on top of the previous hand, I awaited the appearance of my partner's hand with more than a little trepidation. It appeared: ♠A4 ♥432 ♦AKQ10752 ♣6.

Before I had much of a chance to think, the ♣A was led, followed by another club and my ♣Q was covered by the King and ruffed. Now, if diamonds are 3-3, I don't even have to worry about how to play the hearts. Sure enough, they broke 3-3 and the slam came home for 96+%. Noteworthily, those who bid clubs at any point ended up in 3NT for a good score (67+%) or 5♦ for a poor score (25%) or 4♥ for a below average score if making (42+%), and a bottom (3+%) if going down.

The full deal:


```
         N Robot
         ♠A4
         ♥432
         ♦AKQ10752
         ♣6
W Robot          W  N    E    S     E Robot
♠Q8632           Pass 1♦ Pass 1♥    ♠J95
♥98              Pass 2♦ Pass 3NT   ♥Q765
♦J98             Pass 6♦ Pass Pass  ♦643
♣K109            Pass              ♣A52
         S pluckycat    7♦
         ♠K107
         ♥AKJ10
         ♦
         ♣QJ8743
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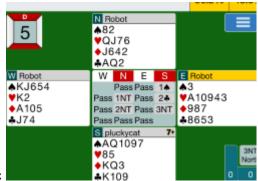
I gave back nearly all of that good board on the next deal. Vulnerable v. nonvulnerable, as South, I held ♠AQ1097 ♥85 ♦KQ3 ♣K109.

 I opened a spade in third seat. Opponents passed throughout. Partner bid 1NT. I, for some reason, didn't even think of passing (rust?) and bid 2♣. Partner bid 2NT, showing 10-11 HCP and fewer than three spades. What now? I was a little flushed with the success of the last hand. I also liked my fillers in my 5-card suit. Lots of 11-point hands will allow me to make 3NT, particularly with the ♠J. Not this time. Partner showed up with 10 points and without a spade honor. Opening lead was the ♥10 to the king and back to the ♥A, followed by a spade. Now, I had to lose 2 hearts, 2 spades and a diamond. Earned my 10+% on the board. I stretched and got my hand caught in the cookie jar.

The majority of folks passed 1NT and made 2 for 65+%. A few only made 1NT for 25%. One other person bid 3NT and made it. Unlike me, he bid two diamonds after 1NT, got raised in diamonds and bid 3NT. He received a club lead, was able to avoid a spade lead as he proceeded to strip the hands of the other suits, and then end-played West in spades at the very end for 100%. A useful lesson on how to play the hand.


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             N Robot
             ♠82
             ♥QJ76
             ♦J642
             ♣AQ2
W Robot           W    N    E    S      E Robot
♠KJ654                 Pass Pass 1♠     ♠3
♥K2               Pass 1NT Pass 2♣      ♥A10943
♦A105             Pass 2NT Pass 3NT     ♦987
♣J74              Pass Pass Pass        ♣8653
             S pluckycat    7+
             ♠AQ1097
             ♥85
             ♦KQ3
             ♣K109
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Th full deal:

On the next board, chastened, I judged to allow the opponents to play in 3♥ instead of pushing to 4♦. Good defense held them to 3 for 82+%. Pushing to 4♦ (as four people did), even non-vulnerable, went down 4 for 14+%.

The full deal:

Less than optimal defense by me on Board 7, resulted in opponents' 4♠ contract going down one instead of two or three, as happened at other tables. I got 17% for that effort.

On the next hand, I had a flat 16 HCP with three aces and two queens. Somehow (have I mentioned rust yet? More like still being in a coma.), I missed a queen and opened 1♦. LHO overcalled 1♥, followed by 1NT by RHO, and that's where they played it, making three. All the normal, wide awake, and not even bright-eyed and bushy-tailed folks, opened my hand 1NT and were allowed to play there for down one (and 71+%), as partner had 4 HCP. I paid the price for my diamond opening and again received 17+%.

So now, with four boards to go, I was well under average and well out of the money, so a push was necessary, when possible.

As dealer on the next hand, my partner opened 2♠. With 12 HCP, I quickly determined that this was not the hand to push with. We made three for 57%.

Board 10 afforded more opportunities. Everyone vulnerable, after a pass, I opened 1♦ with ♠AK2 ♥4 ♦K954 ♣A9876. LHO bid 2♥, showing 6+ hearts and 4-10 HCP. Partner doubled. Pass to me. What would you bid? Well, the choices seemed to be 2♠ or 3♣. I suppose another alternative was 3♥, asking for a stopper. I decided 3♣ was more descriptive and the reason I'd opened 1♦ — to give myself a rebid. If NT is to be bid, robot will have to judge to do that after my forward going bid. My fear was that 2♠ would be passed out (indeed it was, seven times, for 39% when making three and far less when not). Sure enough, my robot bid 3NT. We made on the nose for 82+%.

The full deal:

There wasn't much to the play. East led a heart. West won with the ♥K and led its singleton club back, to the ♣J, Q, and A. The ♦A was known to be with East (remember West can have at most 10 HCP and is known to have the ♥A and ♥K). So, there were four clubs, four spades and the ♦K for the ninth trick.

Okay, two boards to go. I try to stay focused and alert. Not easy at any time, but particularly after the layoff. Anyway, the next hand got my full attention. As dealer, no one vulnerable, I held ♠AKJ976 ♥AKJ2 ♣AJ5.

It seemed clear to me that this hand should be opened 2♣. Yet three people opened it 4♠. A terrible bid, it seems to me, given the extraordinary slam potential of this hand. Queens in any two of your suits and you should have a play for slam. Anyway, the three people who opened 4♠ were naturally left to play there. More about them later. After my 2♣ opener, I heard 3♦ from my robot partner, showing 5+ diamonds and 8+ total points. I ventured 3♠ at this point, trying to see what further I could learn, and my robot bid 6NT. Again, if a robot bids something, there's usually a play for it. Dummy came down, revealing ♠Q83 ♥4 ♦AQ10432 ♣Q72.

 You receive a low heart lead. Plan your play. What do you play on the first trick?

Quickly assessing, you count 6 spades, 2 hearts, 1 diamond, and 2 clubs, possibly after giving up the king. So, the best play seems a 50% chance by taking the heart finesse and putting in the ♥J. It comes through and you make six after losing a trick to the ♣K. Surprisingly, you get 96.4%. (Nine people in slam went down one or two. This hand is one reason I say the quality of the Instant Game is below that of the Hartford Bridge Club, where I hazard to guess that at least 75% would make slam whether in 6♠ or 6NT). Those going down in slam eschewed the finesse (where did they think their 12th trick was going to come from? Dropping the ♥Q doubleton? Dropping the ♦K singleton? Dropping the onside ♣K doubleton? Even combined, the chances of any of that happening are well below 50%). People also lost their way and took the heart finesse, but then cashed the ♦A before losing a club. So, they lost the ♣K and the ♦K. Going down one in the slam resulted in 46+%; going down two resulted in 17+%. The terrible-bidding 4♠ers, as a result, scored 71+%. Sometimes, as we've all seen, bad bids work out well. It pays to be lucky.

The full deal:

Okay, last board coming up and, if I do well, I have a chance to move up above 55% and perhaps near the top. Alas, the last hand seems perfunctory and a candidate to be flat. Everyone indeed does reach 4♠ with my hand. I made five and think everyone should. All you need do is remember to ruff a side suit card before drawing trump. But 6 of15 do not do so and make only four for 17+%, so my making five earns 71+%, allowing me to eke into second place after, at best, a mediocre set. Again, better to be lucky than good. I hope you would have done better.

Stay safe and healthy. See you next week.