

# Playing with Robots

## Part XII

By pluckycat

This week, we return to one of my favorite contests -- Just Declare. This is the daylong \$0.39 BBO game in which, if you do really well, you can earn multiple BBO points because these contests typically draw more than 1,000 participants. The attraction of Just Declare is that, for eight boards, you don't have to worry about your robot partner making a bid you wish it had not made or making a play that gives away a trick or more on defense. The auction is presented to you and although you need to pay close attention to opposition bidding, if there is any, you just need to figure out how to do your very best. Unlike other robot contests, when I'm constantly worried about evil distribution and badly placed cards, on Just Declare, I find it best to plan for a favorable lie of the cards -- if I can just figure out what that is.

So, come along with me for five boards of a recent Just Declare session and match wits with the robots.

**On the first board**, you're in 2♠. After a low club lead you find yourself, as South, looking at

North ♠ K7 ♥ K10875 ♦ 3 ♣ 108743

South ♠ AJ1062 ♥ Q ♦ AJ982 ♣ A6

Plan the play. You don't have many entries to dummy. What I find in Just Declare is that entries are very important. Make good use of them is the mantra running in my head -- and what's the favorable lie of the cards I can hope for. So, I take the low club lead with my ♣ A, cash the ♦ A, ruff a diamond and lead a low ♥ to the ♥ Q, captured by the ♥ A. Not surprisingly, a spade comes back. Take the ♠ K and cash the ♥ K, pitching your last club. Ah-hah! The first favorable lie of the cards occurs. The ♥ J falls doubleton from West. Now you play the ♥ 10, pitching a diamond. West ruffs with the ♠ 9 and returns a club. You ruff and cash the ♠ A. The ♠ Q drops under it by West. Second favorable lie of the cards. You wanted 3-3 spades and the ♠ Q to be in the hand that ruffed a heart. You draw the last trump and end up taking 5 spades, a spade ruff, a heart, a diamond and a club for 9 tricks and 74.24%. Just making your 2♠ contract is worth only 31.82%. Going down one, as 15% of the participants did, was worth 6.06%. The E-W hands were

East ♠ 853 ♥ 96432, ♦ K76 ♣ KQ

West ♠ Q94 ♥ AJ ♦ Q1054 ♣ J952

**On the next board**, you find yourself in 4♥. No opposition bidding again. You're South and, after a low spade lead, you find yourself looking at these hands:

North ♠ J87 ♥ AJ7 ♦ AQ6 ♣ J1094

South ♠ AQ5 ♥ KQ654 ♦ KJ2 ♣ K5

So, what favorable lie of the cards do you need? After analysis, you determine that you need the ♣Q with East. With that card there, you can make six. It's not enough to have the ♣A with East if the ♣Q is with West. If the ♣Q is with East, you can make 6, because you have time to pitch a spade on a club you establish. Here's how the play can go. The low spade lead is covered by the ♠J, ♠K and ♠A. A low ♥ to the ♥J in dummy. Then the ♣J, ducked around to the ♣A. A ♠ back is taken by the ♠Q and the ♣K is led. Draw the outstanding trump ending in dummy. Lead the ♣10 for a ruffing finesse against the ♣Q. Careful not to have used your diamond entries to the board, you go there now to make six. Making six was worth 76.56%; five received 31.25% and four only 4.56%. Those making 4 and 5 typically frittered away their diamond entries. The E-W hands:

East ♠K94 ♥1083 ♦1053 ♣Q862

West ♠10632 ♥92 ♦J984 ♣A73

**On board 3**, as South, you find yourself in 4♠, with no opposition bidding. You get the ♥A lead and see these hands:

North ♠A42 ♥2 ♦J10543 ♣KJ107

South ♠KQJ86 ♥J96 ♦AKQ6 ♣8

West plays low on the ♥A and East switches to the 7♦. What now? Easy enough to ruff one heart in dummy, but if you try to ruff two, how will you get back to your hand? A diamond is the only way, if they split 2-2. If they don't, you'll likely make only four as the ♣A will be cashed after the diamond is ruffed. And if the robot with the ♣A has the third diamond, then you'll go down one if the robot with a singleton diamond has a third spade. With all this calamity running through my head, I play conservatively to make 5, ruffing one heart and then drawing trumps. Wrong. Diamonds are 2-2. So, after ruffing a second heart, you can get back to your hand with another diamond to draw trump and take 2 ruffs, 5 spades and 5 diamonds. Making 6. Only 20% of the field took the bold path to 6 for 91.67%. Most, like me, made 5 for 45.83%. A couple made 4 for 6.25%. One truly misguided traveler went down one for 0%.

**On board 4**, as South, you find yourself playing 5♦ after partner opens 2♣, you respond 2♦, West throws in a 4♠ bid and your robot partner bids 5♦. The hands are:

North ♠6 ♥A75 ♦AKQ987 ♣AK2

South ♠Q43 ♥K1096 ♦653 ♣853.

West leads the A♠, followed by a low diamond. Plan the play. You can obviously lose a heart and a club. You draw trump and play a low heart. East hops up with the ♥J. What do you do? Reflexively cover an honor with an honor late in the round, as I did? Wrong. You now cannot make more than two hearts and you must lose a heart and a club. Duck the heart and West shows out. In any event,

given West's four spade bid, East is odds on to have the lion's share of the hearts. Once you duck, easy enough to return to dummy and take the heart hook. Perhaps not surprisingly, most (12 of 21) acted reflexively like me and covered the ♥ J. We got 27.5%. Those making 5 received 80%.

West ♠ AK98752 ♥ ♦ 2 ♣ J10976; East ♠ J10 ♥ QJ8632 ♦ J104 ♣ Q4

**Last board of the set.** You'd like to go out in style. Both nonvulnerable, the bidding goes:

W	N	E	S
1♦	1♠	P	1N
P	P	P	

After a low diamond lead, you see these hands:

North ♠ AK875 ♥ 1064 ♦ 108 ♣ J106

South ♠ J10 ♥ AQ93 ♦ K943 ♣ 854

Plan the play. East wins the low diamond lead with the ♦ A and returns the ♦ J, which you cover with the ♦ K. The ♠ J seems a reasonable play now. Covered by the ♠ Q and ♠ A. This may be the only time you're in dummy, so you look to develop hearts and either lead the ♥ 10 or a low ♥ and insert the ♥ 9, hoping hearts are 3-3 and either the ♥ J or ♥ K is on your right. Turns out that the ♥ J is there and once West takes his ♥ K, he returns a spade, allowing you to take 2 spades, 2 hearts and a diamond for down one. Any other line of play, results in down two, three and even four. Not getting greedy and not hoping for miscues by the defense was the way to go. Only 6 players went down one for 92.65%, while 15 in the cohort went down two for 61.76%, and 13 went down three for 20.59% and, as is often the case, one poor soul completely lost his way for down four and 0%. The E/W hands were

East ♠ 9632 ♥ J52 ♦ AJ7 ♣ K32

West ♠ Q4 ♥ K87 ♦ Q652 ♣ AQ97

So, what are some of the lessons we've learned? Appreciate the value of entries and plan their use, be optimistic in this contest and try to figure what a good lie of the cards will yield, and do not act reflexively -- ducking may be warranted rather than covering an honor with an honor. Lastly, as I look at all these hands, it seems that finding the right play was not all that difficult, but hindsight is easy and even without time pressure, choosing the right play remains a challenge not to be underestimated. It's why I show that the vast majority of players didn't find the right play at the table and received a low percentage. Pat yourself on the back when you do well. Don't take it for granted.

Good luck and give Just Declare a whirl.

See you next week.