Playing with Robots

Part IV

By pluckycat

I promised last week that I'd discuss the value of the various robot games. But first we should take a step back and analyze the problems the creators of these games face and what challenges they're trying to create for the people like you and me who play them. The most popular robot games are played by more than 1,000 people a day. The problems posed by each hand have to be complex enough to allow for many different levels of play, but still allow a good number of players to achieve solutions and reasonable results. So, it seems best to typically approach each hand with these questions: What are the problems the hand is trying to create for me in the bidding and/or play? What opportunities exist to achieve a stellar result? Have I seen this pattern before? What should be my plan knowing what I know about the robots' proclivities? I'm going to discuss five hands that illustrate the general points I make below.

The Bidding

In regard to the bidding, what do my robot partner's bids tell me and what do my robot opponents' bids tell me? In live bridge, we often try to play in 3NT, remembering Bob Hamman's rule that when that bid is a reasonable possibility, you should bid it. But in robot play, far more frequently than in real life, bidding 3NT will result in a poor score, while a minor-suit game or even a part score will be the better option. Be careful bidding 3NT without known stoppers. Also, don't make easy assumptions. Let's say you open a major in third or fourth seat and your partner makes a Drury bid (showing a limit raise with 3 or 4 trump). If your hand is suitable, don't give up on slam. An easy way to distinguish among players is those who reach slams and those who don't. The great thing about playing with robots is that, a significant percentage of the time, you need to make tough choices–whether to go on or not, whether to support your partner's suit, rebid your own suit, or bid NT. I will tell you that my experience is that sacrifices rarely work out well. Similarly, if your robot partner passes after a takeout double by you, be very, very careful. Also, always check to see what your bid will mean to your partner. Even competing when you think it's clearly warranted can get your robot partner inordinately excited and, suddenly, you're in a game you never intended to be in–and one that goes down two, vulnerable. Be

particularly cautious bidding when vulnerable after your robot partner passes or its bid shows just total points. You can figure it's probably light on HCPs.

The Play

As for the play, as I've repeatedly said, don't expect finesses to work except in the end game when you need them to make the contract. Also, most often, the hand will be makeable if you just figure out the correct way to proceed. Spend some time developing a plan and review what the opponent robots' bidding has been and what it's meant. Also try to discern what the robot opponents are trying to get you to do–take a finesse, ruff, develop a particular suit that almost invariably won't break. Look for counter measures. Really pay attention to spot cards. They often are the key to how to play the hand. Now for a few examples.

1. I held ♠AQJ42 ♥K1052 ♦A5 ♣A5. Three passes to me and I opened 1♠. (Opponents passed throughout.) Partner bid 2♣ (Drury–showing at least 3-card spade support and 11-HCP). I bid 3♠ showing 5+ spades, 21 HCPs, and 19-22 total points. (See last week's description of total points if this term is new to you.) Robot partner bid 4♥–a cue bid showing the ♥A, denying the ♣A and the ♦A (and still 11-HCP). So, my robot cue-bid, clearly showing slam interest. I figured it must be at the top of its range for a passed hand–and, therefore, worth a slam bid. So I bid 6♠. Dummy showed up with ♠1065 ♥AJ76 ♦K82 ♣K42. The ♠K was onside (here I figure that programmers want to reward those who bid six and not put them at risk if they misguess the hearts, but maybe this was just the rare early finesse that works). Anyway, I guessed the ♥Q and ended up with 98.57%. Even misguessing, I would have received 92.86%.

2. I held ♠AKJ52 ♥K72 ♦AKJ7 ♣3. Two passes to me and I opened 1♠. Partner bid 2♠. RHO doubled. I bid 4♣–a splinter showing shortness in clubs, 18-21 HCPs, and 18-22 total points. LHO doubled. Partner bid 4♠. Now I wanted to find out about the ♠Q, so I bid 4NT (RKC Blackwood). Partner responded 5♦ showing 1 keycard. I bid 5♥–asking about the trump Q–and partner bid 5NT showing the ♠Q but no outside K. 6♠s it is. Partner had ♠Q873 ♥AQJ8 ♦5 ♣7652. A club was led and spades split 2-2. There's nothing to the play. Bidding and making 6 was worth 85%. Bidding game and making 6 was worth 32.5%.

3. Here's both a bidding and play problem. As South, I held ♠KQ42 ♥K75 ♦A8 ♣Q1073. The bidding started: N-pass, E-1♣. First decision, do I bid? Those who passed ended up defending 2♥ for a positive score–between 65-81%, depending on the defense. I doubled. The bidding proceeded 1♥ by W, 2♦ by partner robot (which showed 4+ diamonds and 6-10 total points), pass by East and pass by me. No

sense in going on—those who went on got miserable scores. West doubled (showing 1+ diamonds and 11+ total points), which was passed out. So, I was playing 2♦, doubled. Partner's hand was ♠1087 ♥Q97 ♦KJ9762 ♣6. The ♠6 was led to the K, A, and 7. The ♦4 return went to the 2, 10, and A. Diamonds are probably 4-1, so I have 5 diamond tricks, a spade, and at least one heart. Here I lost my way and focused only on the 1♥ bid by West and not on the opening bid by East. After West played the ♠A, East should have the ♥A for his opening bid. Instead, I played for the long shot that East had ♥J10 doubleton rather than the doubleton Ace. All I needed to do was play to the ♥K and then duck a heart to the Ace. 2♦ doubled (5 diamonds, 1 spade and 2 hearts) was worth 93.75%, while 2♦, down 1, earned 37.5%.

It should be noted that when playing 8 boards, each board is worth 12.5%. So a loss of focus or faulty analysis can be costly. Here the difference was 7.03%–the difference between a final score that could ultimately have been a high sixty percent game vs. one that ended up a low sixty percent.

4. One last bidding problem: As South I held ♠AKQJ9432 ♥1084 ♦A8. East, as dealer, passed and I opened 1♠. West bid 2♣. Robot partner bid 2♥, showing 5+ hearts and 11+ total points. East came alive and bid 4♣. This was clearly worth a slam try, so I bid 5♣, which the robot understood as 5+ spades, 3+ hearts, 21 HCPs and 18-22 total points, and came very close to describing my hand. Partner now bid 6♥. I tanked and then passed. Why? I wanted East on lead. Like a good robot, it's most likely to lead what partner has bid–a club. I worried that West might lead a diamond. In any event, East did lead a club. The ♥Q was offside, but with a club lead, six was easy as all of partner's diamonds went away on my spades. Partner's hand was ♠8 ♥AKJ96 ♦J9643 ♣J5. Bidding 6♥ or 6♠ earned 81.25%. Four or five making 6 earned 29.17. Three pairs ventured to seven and went down.

As is true in non-robot bridge, human players are reluctant to bid slams. Slams seem to occur in robot bridge with far greater frequency and it's helpful to be aware of the opportunities to bid them. Trust your robot partner. It has the tools and savvy to help you get there.

5. This is a play problem from Just Declare (where you're given the bidding and just need to play the hands well), emblematic of ones that often appear in that competition. The bidding was 1♥-X-2♥-3♣. I was declarer. Dummy had ♠AK52 ♥52 ♦Q542 ♣Q104. My hand was ♠753 ♥A76 ♦AJ8 ♣9872. The ♥K was led. Analysis revealed two spade tricks, one heart, two diamonds and maybe two clubs. It wasn't looking good. I ducked the first heart. On the bidding, that was low

risk and I might get a helpful switch. Nope. The ♥Q was led next. A heart ruff was available, but that looked wrong. I'd quickly lose club control and be pumped in hearts since opening bidder was sure to have 5. So, hoping the AK of clubs were with West, I led a low club. The ♣K popped up. Now West, bless his mechanical heart, led the ♦10. I often find when I make the right play, the robots are helpful. When I don't, they take full advantage of my mistake. So, it went ♦10, small, and the ♦K was played by East. I won with the ♦A and led another club, ducked, I inserted the ♣10 and the ♣A popped. A diamond came back and I won in hand with the ♦J. A club to the Queen—they broke three-three as I'd hoped for. Now I led the ♦Q. Alas, they did not break three-three and I went down one. The opponents' hands were W: ♠QJ8 ♥KQJ109 ♦106 ♣KJ6; E: ♠1094 ♥843 ♦K973 ♣A54. 3♣. Down 1 was worth 93.75%; 3♣, down 2, got 43.75% (taken in by the allure of the heart ruff, no doubt, as I confirm by looking at the traveler and movie—more about that next week); and 3♣, down three, received 0 (a poor lamb that lost its way—been there done that). By the way, in Just Declare, really look for ways to make overtricks and go for them. In other forms, playing safe to make a contract you don't think others will be in is often worthwhile. Everyone is in the same contract in Just Declare.

Popular BBO Matchpoint Games

Now I'll offer a brief, and admittedly personal, analysis of the value of the most popular matchpoint games on BBO. I'm going to compare Instant Games–both BBO ($0.45)(8 boards) and ACBL ($1.25)(12 boards); BBO $0.39 games (matchpoints)(8 boards); ACBL $1.35 games (matchpoints)(12 boards); and ACBL Support your Club games ($6.00) (18 boards). For this article, the imp games are not discussed.

Instant BBO games award .6 BBO MPs for winning and lesser amounts for coming in second, third or fourth. ACBL instant games award .9 ACBL MPs for coming in first and lesser amounts for other placements. I find it relatively easy to score well in these games and the challenge not to be as great as in the BBO ($0.39) matchpoint games. The instant games come from previous tournaments and that may explain the degree of challenge they present. The instant games also give you your results against 14 other players instantly. They're certainly worth playing on occasion, but not my go-to inexpensive alternative for either BBO or ACBL masterpoint games. For ACBL MPs, I prefer playing the $1.35, 12-board game. You can win up to 1.50 ACBL MPs for doing really well, and for winning your section, you can win .9 MPs. These are also by far the most popular of the ACBL matchpoint games. Indeed, the first of these now typically draw 1,000 or more players daily—and twice as many

participants as the $6.00 ACBL SYC matchpoint games—not surprising, given their relative value. For more than four times the money ($6.00 vs. $1.35), you get to play only 50% more boards (18 vs. 12) and, if you play exceedingly well, you get to earn only 66% more masterpoints (2.5 vs. 1.5). Also, I find the $1.35 games to be the easiest of the games to do well in. To be sure, supporting your club is worthwhile, but there are pairs games and virtual club games that offer that opportunity as well.

For me, the toughest games to do really well in are the BBO $0.39 masterpoints games, whether Just Declare or any of the matchpoint games. But the rewards merit the risk. If you care about BBO points as opposed to ACBL MPs, then you can typically earn, in the most popular of these games, 12 or more points for a score in the mid 70%s, 8 or more points for a score in the low 70%, and 6 or more points for a score in the high 60%s. Do play the games with the most participants. The rewards are greatest in those although, to be sure, you have more people to compete against. Good luck. It always helps.

Next week, I'll talk about how robots play defense as well as movies and travelers, among other attractions.