Playing with Robots

Part XXVII

By pluckycat

This week, we'll look at a trio of hands intensively. The hands present issues that frequently occur in robot play. The first deals with how to approach the notion that most robot games are "best-hand" tournaments, which means you've been dealt the best hand at the table so, at most, a robot has a hand that's equivalent to yours in high-card points. The next two hands deal with slam bidding and some of the nuances of doing so with robots.

In the first deal, your bot partner opens 1♠ in second seat, both vulnerable. RHO passes and you find yourself with ♠A52 ♥AK107 ♦109862 ♣8.

Because this is a best-hand tournament, I know my partner can't have more high-card points than I do. I have prime values and a singleton, but who knows what fit we have with our 22 HCPs. "Points schmoints," says Marty Bergin, but I decided to bid 1NT (forcing). Partner bid 2♣. I could bid 2♦ taking the conservative view that we have duplicative values or the bold view and bid 4♠. Me, I am Goldilocks on this hand and I bid 3♠, mindful of the admonition by my favorite BBO point getter, Usla, that robots don't like aggressive bidders. I also trusted my robot partner to have a sense of when game is likely. Leaving the decision to the robot—it's a partnership game, I remind myself often, here and with human partners—usually turns out okay.

So, if the bot has a hand it thinks suitable for game, it will go on. 3♠ is passed out. To be sure, as I waited for my partner's hand to appear, I started thinking that the bot has even less information than I do about the fit of the hands, so it was probably my call to make and 3♠ may be dead wrong. One of the great things about bridge for me is that self-doubt is never far away. I further think that a little knowledge may be a dangerous thing and my reflections on best-hand bidding may need refinement.

Anyway, here's the full deal:

North
♠ KJ1097
♥ 9
♦ J74
♣ AQ43

West
♠ Q863
♥ 43
♦ AK5
♣ 10972

East
♠ 4
♥ QJ8652
♦ Q3
♣ KJ65

South
♠ A52
♥ AK107
♦ 109862
♣ 8

W	N	E	S
P	1♠	P	1NT
P	2♣	P	3♠
P	P	P	

3♠ N   NS: 0 EW: 0

Several points of interest here. As North, I received a ♥Q lead. This is good, I think. East probably has heart length, which will facilitate my plan to ruff hearts and clubs. I won with the ♥K. Went to the ♣A and ruffed a ♣, cashed the ♥A, discarding a ♦, ruffed a ♥, ruffed a ♣, ruffed another ♥, and ruffed my last ♣ with my ♠A. I lost two diamonds and a spade—making four. But 4♠ should go down on best defense (not easy to find here admittedly). However, as is so often the case, the robots didn't play best defense—all Easts led the ♥Q. Still, I think the decision not to go on to 4♠ probably was sound by both me and my robot partner—too many hands where 4♠ will go down.

Interestingly, in the cohort playing this hand in the daylong ACBL masterpoint game, the hand was played 74 times. One person played in 3NT and got unbelievably favorable defense to allow her to make four for 100%. Eighteen bid and made 4♠ on the same line of play that I took, earning 86.99%. Nineteen folks, like me, stopped in 2♠ or 3♠ and made four, earning 68.49%. Eleven stopped in 2♠ or 3♠ and made only three for 54.79%. Four stopped in 2♠ making two for 44.52%. Nineteen went down one—Fourteen in 4♠, four in 3♠ and one in 2♠ for 28.77%. And 12 went down two or more in 4♠ for 8.77% or less. Those who went down one in 4♠ inevitably played one round of spades and failed to ruff three clubs in dummy. Surprisingly, almost 60% of those in 4♠ received scores below 50%; the play of the hand to make four didn't seem that difficult. Nonetheless, for most, there was good reason for them to have stayed out of 4♠. Even for me, it didn't hurt that much to bid only three and make four.

One hand, of course, doesn't necessarily indicate much. But the foregoing hand makes it clear to me that attention should often be paid to the fact that I'm always dealt the best hand at the table.

In the next hand, I'm dealt ♠6 ♥AK ♦K987 ♣KQ7432. In second seat, vulnerable versus nonvulnerable, I open the hand 1♣. Opponents pass throughout. My bot bids 1♠. I bid 2♣ and my bot bid 3NT, which showed 3-5♠, 5-♥, 14-21 HCP, partial stop in ♥, partial stop in ♦. What do you do now?

Well, I gave it away in the introduction. You should bid on, but what? Actually, I had what I considered the perfect bid. I liked my hand, prime values, a decent 6-card suit, and no worries about spades. So, I thought there's a real possibility of slam if my bot had a suitable hand and I further thought there was little risk in going one higher, so I bid 4NT, which revealed to the bot that I had a quantitative raise inviting 6NT, 3-♠, 15 HCP and twice rebiddable ♣s. My bot cooperated and bid 6NT. This was another case of trusting my robot to do the right thing, here appropriately, particularly when my bid described my hand to a tee.
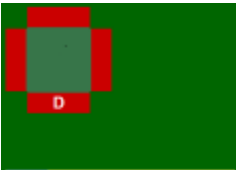
The full deal:

North
♠ A542
♥ J105
♦ AQ54
♣ A10

West
♠ KJ108
♥ 9743
♦ J103
♣ 86

East
♠ Q973
♥ Q862
♦ 62
♣ J95

South
♠ 6
♥ AK
♦ K987
♣ KQ7432

W	N	E	S
		P	1♣
P	1♠	P	2♣
P	3NT	P	4NT
P	6NT	P	P
P			

6NT N   NS: 0 EW:

There was nothing to the play. Clubs and diamonds behaved and I had 13 tricks off the top. The vast majority—42 of 69 in the cohort playing this hand—stopped in 3NT after an auction that started just like mine. They received below average scores. Beyond what I've already said, there's one further good reason for not stopping—robot-play hands contain a much higher percentage of slam hands than occur in ordinary play. Why? I can only think it's one good way to differentiate among the more than 1000 that enter the event. Look for opportunities to bid slam in robot play—not that you always should. One other person and I bid 6NT making 7 for 90.44%. That other person instead of bidding 2♣ at his second turn bid an aggressive 2NT and his robot partner drove to slam. Five bid a grand slam in clubs after they bid 3♣ at their second turn and their robot partner drove to a grand slam. Similarly, one person reversed and bid 2♦ at her second turn and robot partner drove to a grand slam in diamonds. Those six received 96.44%, but I think my auction was the most sensible and didn't exaggerate values. Nonetheless, it's worth emphasizing that robots take your bids very literally and will drive to where they think the contract should be so it behooves you to know what your bid means to the robot and have what you bid or at least close to it.

In the next hand, as dealer, both sides vulnerable, you hold: ♠A9 ♥AJ432 ♦K2 ♣AJ83. Some might open this 1NT. I opened it 1♥, planning to upgrade and bid 2NT if partner bid 1♠. Opponents were silent throughout and partner now bid 2♣. This was promising. I bid 3♣. Partner bid 3♥. Okay. We have a double fit. I tried 3♠, which when I clicked on the bid, would be understood by my bot partner to be "a cue bid, showing 5+♥, 4+♣, 21-HCP, ♠A, 16-22 total points, forcing." As I hoped for, bot partner responded 4♦, which was revealed as "a cue bid, 13+HCP, 3+♥, biddable ♣, no ♣A, ♦A: 14+total points." I confidently, perhaps too confidently, now bid 6♥.

Oops. West led a ♣ which was ruffed and I still had to lose a ♥.

The full deal:

North
- ♠ KQ7
- ♥ 1065
- ♦ A4
- ♣ KQ1076

West
- ♠ 863
- ♥ Q97
- ♦ 1096
- ♣ 9542

East
- ♠ J10542
- ♥ K8
- ♦ QJ8753
- ♣

South
- ♠ A9
- ♥ AJ432
- ♦ K2
- ♣ AJ83

W	N	E	S
			1♥
P	2♣	P	3♣
P	3♥	P	3♠
P	4♦	P	6♥
P	P	P	

6♥ S   NS: 0 EW: 0

The result was somewhat unlucky. With reasonably normal distribution, I would have only had to pick up the ♥ suit with one loser, playing East for an honor doubleton in ♥s or KQx. Was it a good slam to be in? No, but primarily because of the spots—I'm missing the 987 as well as the KQ in ♥s--so it only succeeds on three of 13 possible distributions of the adverse five-card ♥ suit. But my bot partner could well have had a ♥ honor besides the 10. Moreover, I've found that when you bid reasonably to perhaps a stretch contract, particularly a slam, BBO often gives you a way of making it or your robot opponents help. Indeed, one person here received 100% for bidding and making the ♥ slam. Unlike those of us who raised clubs on our second bid (13 in number, about 20% of the field, bid the heart slam), the successful outlier rebid hearts so West's lead was not a ♣ and the slam sailed home. Unfortunately, the failure to make the slam was very costly as I received 11.43%. Bidding game and making five would have yielded 44%. Nearly a third of the cohort was in 3NT, making 5 or 6, and 10% of the cohort bid game, but made 6♥ because they didn't raise clubs at their second turn. In short, I had made an aggressive bid that should have—and did have—chances. It didn't work out on this occasion. It can't always. What would be the fun of that? But my aggressiveness (most of the time) still led to a 67.53% session in the daylong contest (38th of 1272 entrants) and the hands at issue confirmed my trust in my robot partner's bidding.

Stay safe and healthy. And please attend the Annual meeting if you can.