

Playing with Robots

Part XXXIV

By pluckycat

Each month, BBO announces which players have achieved the highest BBO point totals in the previous month. In November, names that are very familiar to readers of these articles topped the list. Leo La Sota was first with 773.26 points (How does he do that?!?); usla was second with 529.57; leftfoot was fifth with 459.08. Another name appeared third on the list. It's a name I see frequently when I review the high finishers in the ACBL daylong robot 12-board tournaments on BBO. That name is punxsyphil. Just as I've explored the techniques and tactics of Leo La Sota, usla and leftfoot to see what can be gleaned from their bidding and play, I thought it would be worthwhile to turn to a new expert and see what we can learn from reviewing boards played by punxsyphil.

I reviewed the first three ACBL masterpoint daylongs played by punxsyphil on December 7; 36 boards in all. The review was heartening. punxsyphil had 73.86%, 70.30%, and 67.67% in those three tournaments, but he, unlike the other experts we've looked at, bids very much like you and I would. To be sure, he opens 1NT with 14 HCPs, but those hands contain a five-card minor suit. These days, I suspect most non-novices would open 1NT with such hands. Rather, punxsyphil achieved his results by sound bidding judgment and astute play of the cards. He did nothing you and I can't do, but he did it with considerable consistency. Also heartening was the fact that, on occasion, his judgment was off. I'll explore three hands that appear particularly instructive.

The first board has lessons in both bidding and play. The bidding started 1♣-2♣. What would you bid in third seat, not vul v. vul, with ♠763 ♥Q94 ♦AK976 ♣K4 after your opponent's Michaels cue bid?

On this board, the vast majority of Souths—42 of the 57—bid 2♦ over 2♣, which said to their robot partners, "natural, not forcing 2-♣, twice rebiddable ♦, 7-9 total points." Not nearly accurate. But my guess is most players didn't even click on the bid to see what it would mean, assuming that 2♦ would be close to accurate. Such assumptions are costly in robot play. Six players leapt to 3♦, which oddly revealed exactly the same "natural, not forcing 2-♣, twice rebiddable ♦, 7-9 total points." Clearly, these folks didn't explore alternatives and their bids led to terrible results. Their bot partners passed the 2♦ bids, the Michaels bidder reopened with a double, which was left in. West had ♦QJ10843. Disaster. The 3♦ bidders fared just slightly better when their bids went undoubled.

Did you come up with 2♠? punxsyphil did. He was the only one of the 57 playing the hand to do so. It perfectly fits the hand. When you click on the bid it says, "constructive fourth suit, 5+♦, 10+

total points." My guess is that punxsyphil knew by experience what the right bid was. For those, like me, without punxsyphil's experience and acumen, the lesson here is to explore the possibilities when playing with robots and not just settle on the first bid that seems okay or that you assume is okay. Try searching for the most accurate bid and click on some others to see what they say. Not a bad lesson for playing with humans either. Click on bids in your head and run through what they are likely to convey to your partner. Wish I had done that the other day when I should have used new minor forcing and instead awkwardly advanced to an inferior slam that went down, when a better slam was available and succeeded. With robots you can actually click on the bid you intend to make and then explore the possibilities, knowing fairly precisely what it is you will be conveying to your robot partner, something I would love to be able to do with my human partners, as lately some of my bids seem clear as mud to my human partners.

There was no reason here for folks not to search for a more accurate bid and click on some other bids to see what they said. When you come to 2♠, bingo. You, like punxsyphil, would have found your bid. From there, his auction proceeded to game. Peek at just the bidding in the full deal below. In this "best-hand" tournament, punxsyphil knew it appeared likely that opener had the same high-card points he did after the bot's 3♦ bid in response to his 2♠ revealed "11+HCP, 12-14 total points." Game was a good shot. Would you, however, play the hand well enough to succeed in making game?

The opening lead was the ♠Q. Dummy came down with ♠K1095 ♥K105 ♦52 ♣AQ107. Plan the play.

punxsyphil won with the ♠K and continued spades. East took his ♠A and ♠J and continued spades. punxsyphil won in dummy and played the ♥K. West, in the run of the spades, helpfully threw a club, so punxsyphil took two spades, one heart, two diamonds and four clubs for nine tricks and 100% out of the 57 persons who played the hand. If need be, he could have finessed East for the ♥J. Only three others were in the NT game and they went down one or two, still for very good scores of 86% and 78% in light of the disaster awaiting those who ended up in diamond contracts.

The full deal:

D 9	N Robot	W N E S
	♠ K1095 ♥ K105 ♦ 52 ♣ AQ107	1♣ 2♠ 2♠ P 3♦ P 3♥ P 3NT P P P
W Robot	E Robot	
♠ 2 ♥ 83 ♦ QJ10843 ♣ J965	♠ AQJ84 ♥ AJ762 ♦ ♣ 832	
	S punxsyphil	
	♠ 763 ♥ Q94 ♦ AK976 ♣ K4	3NT N NS: 0 EW: 0

On another board, not vul v. vul, our stalwart South held ♠A7 ♥QJ52 ♦A3 ♣QJ976. The bidding proceeded:

W	N	E	S
		1♣	P
P	X	P	

What do you do now?

Most bid 1♥, 1NT or 2NT. Our hero passed. Only 11 of 65 passed. Four, including punxsyphil, set the doubled contract two tricks for +500 and 98%. The reopening double showed three plus cards in each suit except clubs and 9+ HCP. punxsyphil knew his side had the balance of power, that he was sitting behind the 1♣ opener and that dummy had very little. It was sound judgment to pass. And punxsyphil reaped his just reward. One of the reasons bridge has such fascination is that there are so many possibilities that can occur with each hand. Here, the bidding resulted in 25 different contracts. The full deal:

	North	
	♠J8643	
	♥K86	
	♦KQ652	
	♣ --	
West		East
♠K5		♠Q1092
♥1073		♥A94
♦9874		♦J10
♣10853		♣AK42
	South	
	♠A7	
	♥QJ52	
	♦A3	
	♣QJ976	

The next board revealed a rare lapse of judgment by punxsyphil. I was happy to see it. It also reinforced one of the things I've been stressing in many of these articles. When you have a competitive auction, winning it usually works out best.

Our hero South, with feet of clay on this board, held ♠95 ♥QJ ♦K104 ♣AQ973, vulnerable against not. The bidding proceeded:

W	N	E	S
	1♥	1♠	4♥
4♠	P	P	?

What would you bid now?

First, punxsyphil's 4♥ bid was more than questionable. It revealed a preemptive bid, with 4+♥ and 7-9 total points. Scarcely what his hand was. Why did he bid it? A lapse in judgment? Operating against a likely spade contract by the opposition? Either way, the 4♥ bid gave him a tough judgment call when West bid 4♠. Here, he no doubt doesn't know North's heart length, knows his pair has the balance of power, is sitting behind the overcaller with some likely tricks and so makes what seems the reasonable judgment of doubling. Wrong this time! Even vulnerable, in this circumstance, I think it's right to bid on against robots. 4♠ went down 1.

The full deal:

5	N North	W N E S
	♠ A ♥ A10987643 ♦ Q ♣ J102	1♥ 1♠ 4♥ 4♠ P P X P P P
W West	E East	
♠ KJ82 ♥ K2 ♦ 87653 ♣ 86	♠ Q107543 ♥ AJ92 ♦ K54	
	S South	
	♠ 96 ♥ QJ5 ♦ K104 ♣ AQ973	4♠ E NS: 0 EW: 0

The vast majority of the cohort sitting N-S, like punxsyphil, played the hand in 4♥ or 5♥, making five or six. Six achieved a very good score and five an above average one. Nearly all of those in heart contracts cue bid 2♠ over the 1♠ bid, showing a limit raise in support of hearts. In that auction, E-W didn't bid above 4♥. In other words, the correct bid, as it often does in robot play, avoids a problem that another bid may create, as was true in punxsyphil's case.

Now, having looked at the full deal, you may be thinking your dumb robot partner should have bid 5♥. But robots typically leave such decisions to their human partners. Moreover, often they have hands like the one this robot North had, where you would hope a human partner would bid again and take out the double. Robots often defer and like to await their partner's bids, which is why bids that stretch the hand's values result in inferior contracts. Remember, as usla told us in a previous article, robots do not like aggressive bidders. In other words, be competitive, but be sound. Here

the 4♥ bid was in the aggressive category, leading to the opponents' 4♠ bid. Those playing in hearts and making six scored 90%, while punxsyphil scored 23%.

I find that looking at how experts handle robot play is invariably a learning experience. I hope you do too. I really love how BBO allows you to go to the movies and follow the bidding and play of everyone who played the same hand. I've always thought that one learns most from one's betters, a good reason to at least occasionally step up the competitive level one plays in.

Enough for now.

Stay warm, safe and healthy and see you next week.