

Playing with Robots

Part XI

By pluckycat

Among the joys of playing bridge for me are the subtle and constant challenges the game offers. Those subtleties and challenges take on an added dimension when playing with and against robots as you try to take into account their proclivities and the nuances of the hands you encounter. To illustrate what I am referring to in these sentences, we'll take a deep dive into a single hand in this article. I am playing in my usual daylong ACBL game when this hand comes up, nonvulnerable v. vulnerable: ♠ A ♥ AJ73 ♦ KJ632 ♣ A96.

It goes pass to you. What do you open as South?

I chose 1 ♦. For whatever reason, I am not a big fan of opening 1NT with singleton As, let alone singleton Ks or Qs. The bidding then continues:

P - 1 ♦ - 1 ♠ - P

P - ?

Nonvulnerable, I chose double. Is there a better bid? Later and upon reflection, I find out there probably is. And worse you probably see it. The beauty of going to the movies on BBO.

Anyway, it then goes:

P - 1 ♦ - 1 ♠ - P

P - X - 2 ♥ - P

2 ♠ - ? What do you bid?

Here if vulnerable I would pass thinking this is a trap hand in robot play. But nonvulnerable and knowing that most of the time it pays to declare and not defend against robots, I bid 3 ♦. My 3 ♦ shows 3+ ♣, 6-7 ♦, 3+ ♥, 2- ♠, 21-HCP, 15-22 Total Points. Close enough and the best I think I can do. Later I learn I can again do better. I love double features at the movies.

Anyway, it goes pass to my poor benighted robot partner who now chimes in with 3 ♠, showing 2+ ♦ and 7-8 total points. What now? I bid 4 ♦ and hold my breath. Mercifully, my robot partner passes and we end up in 4 diamonds. The full deal:

North

♠ 9754

♥ 92

♦ A84

♣ QJ73

♠ KJ1082

♥ KQ86

♦ Q5

♣ 52

♠ Q63

♥ 1054

♦ 1097

♣ K1084

South

♠ A

♥ AJ73

♦ KJ632

♣ A96

So now plan your play after the 5 ♣ lead.

West has bid spades and hearts and probably is five -four in those suits with at least 10 HCP. Given the robots' proclivities to make passive leads, the 5 ♣ looks like a doubleton. It may be a singleton. Unlikely to be low from three. Anyway, looks right to play the Q ♣. Covered and you play the Ace. What now? You have a sure club loser and at least two heart losers and a potential diamond loser. I made the wrong play here. (More about the right play later). Eager for a heart ruff I played Ace and another heart. West rose with the Q and played back the 2 ♣. I won with the J and played to my ♠ A and the ruffed a heart. Now I pinned my hopes on the diamond finesse, knowing there were three on my right. Wrong. Down one.

The better way to play the hand, particularly against robots, would have been at trick two to go to the board with a low diamond to the Ace, then lead a low heart from the board and insert a low heart from your hand. To stop ruffs, West, his bot head no doubt cranking through simulations as you see a slight pause, now leads his

Q of diamonds making the hand easy, allowing declarer to make four. Lose two hearts and a club.

The cohort I was in played the hand 45 times with 11 different results. Here is what the traveler revealed:

- 1 time: 3NT (S) = 400 for 100%
- 11 times: 2 ♠ (W) = 200 for 84.62%
- 4 times: 3 ♦ (S) = 130 for 65.38%
- 7 times: 3 ♦ (S) = 110 for 51.28%
- 6 times: 3 ♦ (S) = -50 for 26.92%
- 2 times: 3 ♣ (N) = -50 for 26.92%
- 3 times: 3NT (S) = -50 for 26.92%
- 1 time: 4 ♦ (S) = -50 for 26.92% (Me)
- 2 times: 5 ♦ (S) = -100 for 8.95%
- 2 times: 5 ♦ (S) = -150 for 3.85%
- 1 time: 5 ♥ (S) = -300 for 0%

Some comments on these results and the bidding that got them there. All four of the hands that ended up in 3NT, opened 1NT. There was interference by E-W with a Cappelletti bid and North balanced with 2NT and South went on. The one pair of the four to make 3NT, ducked the opening 5 ♣ lead and captured the ten with the Ace. Then she played the 9 ♣, won the spade return with the Ace, cleared the clubs and then took the diamond finesse. At this point the robot led the heart K. East had bid hearts in response to the Cappelletti bid so North luckily trotted home with 4 diamonds, 3 Clubs and two Aces in the majors. The other three in 3NT all rose with an honor in clubs, forgetting the likely passive lead from the robot, and thereafter could not make three club tricks.

Interestingly on this board, the usual notion that one should be declarer and not defend against robots didn't hold true. Those who passed two spades, about a quarter of the field, did very well setting that contract by two tricks, vulnerable. My hand seemed too good to pass. There is some small solace in the fact that 3/4s of the field thought so too.

Alas, there is no solace in the fact of the 22 persons in diamonds, I played the hand better than 8, as well as 9, and more poorly than only 4. I didn't give myself the best chance to make my contract or to have the robots help me.

A couple of other interesting points about this seemingly straightforward hand. Of the seventeen hands that stopped in 3 diamonds, the bidding went:

P- 1♦ - 1♠ - P

P -2♥ - P - 3♦

All Pass

In hindsight, 2♥, reversing, may be a better bid than my double. It certainly turns out to be better. It gives you a chance to pass the robot's bid rather than relying on the robot to pass yours. It accurately describes your hand and typically would show five diamonds and four hearts. Only four people doubled instead of bidding two hearts, and I was the only one able to stop in 4 diamonds when the dust settled.

To sum up the lessons: first, think carefully about what the right bid is and check both your robot's bids, your opponents' bids and your own bids and their implications both for the bidding and the play. Here a reverse and not a double was probably the right second bid by me and that alone cost me a quarter of a board. Secondly, remember that robots tend to lead passively, particularly against NT. Third, during the play, give the robots a chance to go wrong. Ducking works a surprising amount of the time. Always look for opportunities to duck when it can't hurt you but remember robots rarely lead away for unsupported honors. Finally, remember that these hands were designed to differentiate dozens if not hundreds of players so there are difficult choices to be made and you are unlikely to get them all right. Don't get frustrated and down because you get an early board wrong. You can recover.

A playing tip

I thought I would note that the four out of the last six times I played I found myself playing this combination: KJxx opposite A9xx. It is a combination that appears frequently when I play against robots with the Q and 10 of a suit outstanding amidst five outstanding pieces in the suit. Each time I played to drop the doubleton 10 and it worked every time. No guarantees of success in the future but I wanted to alert to the frequency with which that combination occurs and the fact again that finesses usually don't work in BBO play against robots unless it is the last finesse to be taken and the contract depends on it. And finally that BBO is

trying hard to find ways to differentiate among participants so don't expect the cards to lie favorably.

Good luck, stay safe and healthy and see you next week.