

Playing with Robots

Part XXX

By pluckycat

Last week, I said I'd revisit the bidding and play of my old friend Usla, the Romanian expert who's the second-highest lifetime point achiever on BBO. The occasion for this revisit was Usla's 89.93% game in a 12-board ACBL daylong game. It was by no means a fluke. Usla led all qualifiers with a more than 68% average in the recent Bridge International Championships. We'll look at six boards from Usla's nearly 90% round and see what we can learn. I also want to note that Leo La Sota, the Ace and top point-getter in BBO history, placed second in the first practice round for the NABC Robot Championships, which are scheduled for later this month. He scored 78.48% in the practice round, and I'll look briefly at his tactics and one of his boards. Lastly, I realized I didn't fully analyze one of the hands I played last week and so I do so this week.

Normally, I'd set forth Usla's hands and ask you to bid them and then compare them to Usla's bids. But no one bids like Usla. I've said before there's genius there and a deep knowledge of the robots' proclivities in bidding and play. Having said that, I should note that Usla, although the top qualifier in the BIC Championship, didn't finish in the top 100 of the 419 qualifiers. I asked him what happened but, I suppose not surprisingly, I've received no response. All that means to me is that sometimes Usla's risk-taking may backfire.

In the six deals I'm using, Usla either scored 100% or tied for a top.

Board 1

The first deal is:

D 1	N Robot	W N E S
	♠ 953 ♥ AQ752 ♦ KJ8 ♣ 94	P P P 1♦ P 1♥ P 3NT P P P
W Robot	E Robot	
♠ K4 ♥ 94 ♦ AQ1073 ♣ 8652	♠ QJ86 ♥ J1086 ♦ 6 ♣ KJ103	
	S usla	
	♠ A1072 ♥ K3 ♦ 9542 ♣ AQ7	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

This is a common scenario for Usla: He opens a 13- or 14HCP hand in 1 of his weakest minor, sees his partner respond 1 of a major, and then leaps to 3NT against silent opponents. What does he know? Robots defend by leading passively and neutrally most of the time. He has prevented a lead into his

weakness because robots will respect his diamond opening bid. So, more than likely, he'll get a favorable opening lead and receive favorable defense later because the robots won't attack his weakness. Sure enough, here the robots avoided a diamond lead (or continuation) and led a heart, allowing Usla time to develop four hearts tricks, two club tricks, two diamond tricks and a spade trick making 3NT for 100%, when no one else came close to bidding 3NT, and everything was in the right place for him.

Board 12

This deal follows a similar theme:

♠ 12	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ A1032	P	P	P	1♦
	♥ J743	P	1♥	P	3NT
	♦ Q52	P	P	P	
	♣ 104	P	P	P	
W Robot	E Robot				
♠ KQJ	♠ 8765				
♥ 95	♥ A1086				
♦ J87643	♦ K10				
♣ K2	♣ Q65				
S usla					
♠ 94					
♥ KQ2					
♦ A9					
♣ AJ9873					
		3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0			

Here again, Usla opened his weaker minor with a 14HCP hand and, against silent opponents, bid 3NT when his passed-hand partner responded with a major. So, once again, the robots eschewed a diamond lead or diamond continuation. Instead, Usla received a spade lead and, when he ducked, a heart continuation, which East won with the ♥ A and continued hearts. Now, Usla won with ♥ K, cashed the ♥ Q and, guessing that West had a doubleton club honor, led a low club toward his ♣ 10. West rose with the ♣ K and played the ♠ Q, taken by the ♠ A. The ♥ J was cashed and now the club finesse yielded four club tricks to go along with three hearts, a spade and a diamond, to make 3NT, for another 100%, as again no one in the field even sniffed at 3NT.

Yet another hand in this set featured nearly identical bidding, again reaching 3NT. A 14HCP hand, opened in the weak minor, and then a leap to 3NT against silent opponents after Usla's passed-hand robot partner bid a major. Again 100%. Usla must figure that a favorable defense will give him good chances to make if the remaining points outside his hand are at all evenly divided. In this session, at least, such thinking paid off handsomely.

Board 7

Now for something a little different:

<div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">7</div> <div style="border: 1px solid red; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">D</div>	N Robot ♠ 102 ♥ KQ9 ♦ QJ108752 ♣ 6	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>W</th> <th>N</th> <th>E</th> <th>S</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1♠</td> <td>2♠</td> <td>P</td> <td>1♦</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>3♦</td> <td>P</td> <td>2NT</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td>3NT</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	W	N	E	S	1♠	2♠	P	1♦	P	3♦	P	2NT	P	P	P	3NT
	W	N	E	S														
	1♠	2♠	P	1♦														
P	3♦	P	2NT															
P	P	P	3NT															
W Robot ♠ KJ8753 ♥ 10 ♦ A43 ♣ J52	E Robot ♠ A9 ♥ 7642 ♦ K6 ♣ A9843																	
S usla ♠ Q64 ♥ AJ853 ♦ 9 ♣ KQ107	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0																	

Despite his five-card major, Usla again opened his weak (singleton) minor and, despite a weak spade holding, bid NT twice in the face of the opposition's spade overcall. Ah, the trusting robots, bless them! West eschewed a spade lead and led a low club. East took the ♣A, setting up three club tricks for Usla. East led back a club and Usla of course took the ♣K, hiding the location of the ♣Q. He then went to the board with a heart and led the ♦Q, which was ducked by East, no doubt fearing a singleton ♦A with West, since Usla "must have" three diamonds for his opening bid. West ducked as well because it too, no doubt, thought Usla must have three diamonds for his opening bid. Bingo. Usla now had a diamond to go along with his five hearts and three clubs for another clear top, as no one again was in 3NT.

Again, we see how Usla's use of a deceptive opening bid gains him enormous advantages in the play of the hand and makes otherwise unmakeable contracts makeable against the trusting robots.

Usla's deception takes many forms. Here's another board on which his bidding misled his robot opponents.

Board 8

<div style="border: 2px solid gray; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">8</div> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">D</div>	N Robot ♠ 84 ♥ 85 ♦ J976 ♣ KJ1075	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>W</th> <th>N</th> <th>E</th> <th>S</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1♥</td> <td>P</td> <td>1♠</td> <td>X</td> </tr> <tr> <td>XX</td> <td>2♠</td> <td>3♥</td> <td>P</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4♥</td> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	W	N	E	S	1♥	P	1♠	X	XX	2♠	3♥	P	4♥	P	P	P
	W	N	E	S														
	1♥	P	1♠	X														
XX	2♠	3♥	P															
4♥	P	P	P															
W Robot ♠ A102 ♥ A97432 ♦ 4 ♣ A64	E Robot ♠ Q653 ♥ KJ6 ♦ KQ82 ♣ 98																	
S usla ♠ KJ97 ♥ Q10 ♦ A1053 ♣ Q32	4♥ W NS: 0 EW: 0																	

Look at Usla's double. Would any of you in your right mind have made it? Of course not. But the effect it had on the play of the hand was enormously beneficial to Usla. His robot partner led a club. Declarer won the ♣A and led a heart, finessing the ♥J, losing to Usla's ♥Q, a reasonable finesse on the bidding but otherwise very unlikely to be taken. The defense was thus able to take four tricks setting the contract for a near top.

Board 9

The next board offers yet another example of how Usla's deception works to his benefit:

D 9	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ Q3 ♥ AJ10873 ♦ J10 ♣ K64	P	1♥	P	2♦
W Robot		P	2♥	P	3NT
		P	P	P	
	E Robot				
	♠ KJ764 ♥ K52 ♦ K843 ♣ 5	♠ 1052 ♥ Q94 ♦ Q97 ♣ J1083			
	S usla				
	♠ A98 ♥ 6 ♦ A652 ♣ AQ972	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0			

Here, Usla's 2♦ overcall, instead of the more normal 2♣ overcall, misled the robot defenders and created a very favorable defense. The West robot, loathe to lead away from a King and certainly loathe to lead a diamond in the face of Usla's diamond overcall, led its singleton club, establishing five club tricks for Usla. With the ♠K in the right place, Usla then was able to make 4NT, as diamonds were never led by the defense and Usla lost only two hearts and a spade. Most others were in 4♥s going down, for a tied-for-top for Usla.

The last board I'll analyze in this set of Usla's is another variation on the theme of Usla's making a bid to deceive the robots even when a perfectly normal bid to an eventual contract is available. It's apparent that Usla doesn't want perfectly normal. What fun and profit is there in that?

Board 11

Here's Usla's last deal:

11 D	N Robot	W N E S
	♠ 85 ♥ KJ10843 ♦ Q102 ♣ 65	P 1♥ P 1♣ P P P 3NT
	W Robot	E Robot
♠ A106 ♥ 975 ♦ 763 ♣ AKQ8	♠ K973 ♥ 62 ♦ J854 ♣ J107	
	S usla	
	♠ QJ42 ♥ AQ ♦ AK9 ♣ 9432	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

Nearly everyone in the universe playing a strong NT would open Usla's hand 1NT. He opened—you guessed it—1♣. It had the desired effect. The defense didn't rattle off their top five tricks (six if they unscramble the clubs) and Usla made his contract after a diamond lead. Moreover, most played in 4♥, invariably going down one.

I've learned in certain spots to try Usla's deceptive tactics. I use them rarely, but when I do, they work. It's also a lot of fun to deceive the robots.

Leo LaSota on the other hand plays a much more recognizable game. He does often upgrade and bid 1NT with 14HCPs and 2NT with 18 or 19 HCPs. But generally, you and I would agree with his bidding.

Here's one of the deals he scored a top on.

10 D	N North	W N E S
	♠ K2 ♥ AQ6542 ♦ 102 ♣ 1092	P 4♦ P 4♥ P P P 1NT
	W West	E East
♠ QJ865 ♥ J107 ♦ Q8 ♣ AJ5	♠ 4 ♥ 93 ♦ J97654 ♣ KQ84	
	S South	
	♠ A10973 ♥ K8 ♦ AK3 ♣ 763	4♥ S NS: 0 EW: 0

La Sota opened his 14HCP hand 1NT as he is wont to do despite a five-card spade suit. Hiding the spade suit helped in the play. LaSota made 12 tricks here to tie for top. Think how you would do it after the ♠Q lead (which almost certainly would not have been made if La Sota had opened 1♠). LaSota took the ♠A in his hand, then rattled off five hearts, discarding a diamond and two clubs from his hand. Poor West having no idea that La Sota had five spades, discarded two spades.

Curtains. LaSota then cashed the ♠K and came to his hand with a top diamond. Led the ♠10 for the marked ruffing finesse against West's ♠J, scoring six heart tricks, four spades and two diamonds. Following the practice of La Sota and other BBO experts, I now open most 14HCP hands 1NT against robots, again to good effect generally.

Last week, I discussed a hand I thought I should have done better with.

Here's the full deal:

		N North ♠ Q2 ♥ QJ5 ♦ 1032 ♣ A8643	<table border="1"> <tr> <th>W</th> <th>N</th> <th>E</th> <th>S</th> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td>P</td> <td>1♥</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1♠</td> <td>2♥</td> <td>P</td> <td>P</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	W	N	E	S			P	1♥	1♠	2♥	P	P	P			
W	N	E	S																
		P	1♥																
1♠	2♥	P	P																
P																			
W West ♠ KJ653 ♥ 1087 ♦ A7 ♣ Q52		E East ♠ 98 ♥ 62 ♦ QJ9865 ♣ KJ7																	
	S South ♠ A1074 ♥ AK943 ♦ K4 ♣ 109		2♥ S NS: 0 EW: 0																

A low heart was led and I won with the ♥Q in dummy and immediately led a diamond to my ♦K, which lost to the ♦A. West led back a heart and now I couldn't ruff a spade in dummy and I didn't have the entries to establish clubs in dummy, when clubs turned out to be 3-3 in the opponents' hands. I said what I should have done was let the heart lead run around to my hand, win with ♥9 and immediately lead a spade—in light of the bidding—so I could ultimately ruff a spade. A sharp-eyed reader pointed out that West, upon winning the ♠K, could lead a heart and I would have no way to get back to my hand to ruff a spade before a third heart was led by the defense. What I failed to say was that when West won the ♠K (which it was almost certain to have in light of the bidding), it led back a spade to the ♠Q. That allowed those in 2♥ to make three because now declarer could get back to his hand with a heart and lead back a low spade to ruff. A key point is worth noting. It's almost always best to give the robots a chance to make a mistake and help you, so there's no good reason to lead to the ♦K early. Often, robots cash an Ace when a King is in declarer's hand, when had the robot waited, it may well have captured the King. Here was such a possibility. West may well have cashed the ♦A. Also, I could have played for 3-3 clubs by leading a club to my ♣A in dummy and continuing a club. Let's say East wins and leads the ♦Q so the defense gets two diamond tricks. What does the defense lead now? No matter what the lead, I can get to the board and ultimately make five hearts, three clubs and the ♠A for nine tricks. And in some instances, helpful defense allowed some declarers to make ten tricks on this particular hand. I can't stress enough giving robots a chance to go wrong on defense. Particularly duck when you can.

Stay safe and healthy.