

Playing with Robots

Part XXXII

By pluckycat

This week, I want to discuss three topics. I'll take you through my adventures and misadventures during the Saturday and Sunday sessions in the first two rounds of the Fall 2020 NABC Robot Individual, for which 3259 persons registered to play. Next week, I'll discuss what occurred in the third and last round on Monday. I'll also talk a little about the differences between playing with three robots and playing against humans and why some of what I and others do against robots would be illegal under ACBL rules when playing against humans. Lastly, I'll make a few brief comments about last Sunday's game at the Hartford Bridge Club, in which I and 31 others partnered with a robot against others partnering with robots. Most of the comments I've heard were that it was a lot of fun and folks are eager to do it again.

Differences Between Playing with Robots and Playing with Humans

Let's start with the differences between playing with robots and humans. First, most robot tournaments, like the Fall 2020 NABC Robot Individual, are "best hand" tournaments. That means you're dealt the best hand at the table in terms of high card points (HCPs). This makes an enormous difference in thinking about both the bidding and play of the hand. For example, if you have an 11- or 12HCP hand, you know your partner can't have a better hand. So, let's say you open an 11- or 12-point hand in a minor in first or second seat and your partner bids 1NT. You immediately know game is unlikely and you may well pass what would otherwise be a forcing response. Similarly, if you have an 11-point hand and an opponent has shown up with 8HCP, you know he can't have that missing Ace.

Also, for those who've followed recent articles, you know that many experts in robot play open off-shape hands 1NT or 2NT to very good effect. It would be illegal to open some of those hands while playing against humans. I, and they, are trying to deceive the robots about shape and point count. Under ACBL rules, you can't open 1NT or 2NT with a singleton that's anything other than an Ace, King or Queen. Moreover, if you do open with a singleton A, K or Q, then you can't have 10 cards in two suits. In other words, you can't open 1NT or 2NT with both a singleton and a doubleton. In robot play, virtually anything goes. Not surprisingly, against humans, we all need to adhere to codes that make for a better and fairer game.

To be sure, there are many other differences between robot and human games, e.g., robots don't generally signal count and, therefore, don't necessarily pay attention to *your* signals, so if you're expecting a ruff when you've signaled a doubleton and don't receive it, that can be frustrating. Many of the previous articles discussed these differences and, last week, I did review a top ten list of tips for playing with robots.

Last Sunday's HBC Game Partnering with Robots Against Others Playing with Robots

As I mentioned, this game was a lot of fun and, like most contests, the format presents its own challenges. As is true with all duplicate masterpoint games in which you play against humans, who you play against and when you play against them is largely determinative of the results you achieve. Here, someone, out of obvious nervousness about playing with robots, passed the robot's opening 2♣ bid. Stuff happens. I, on the other hand, tended to forget I was also playing against humans. When playing against robots it's generally best, in a competitive auction, to win the auction. To be sure, there are exceptions and one needs to be particularly careful when vulnerable with a passing robot partner. Well, I was reminded that with humans, they often stretch beyond their capacity to achieve. Here is an example:

As declarer, I held ♠AQ10532 ♥K6 ♦J62 ♣KJ. I opened a spade and the bidding went:

W	N	E	S
1♠	P	1N	2♥
2♠	3♥	3♠	4♥

I'm not vulnerable; opponents are vulnerable. South is a human. What do you do now?

Well I bid on to 4♠, promptly got doubled, and went down for a tie for bottom. Had I thought that I likely have three defensive tricks and partner should be able to supply one, I could have doubled as two others did for a tie for top. I hate losing almost 5% on a single board, which is, of course, what happens when you play 18 boards and trade a top for a bottom.

The full deal:

D	N Robot	W	N	E	S
	♠ 64 ♥ J42 ♦ 9 ♣ A1097653	1♠ P 2♠ 3♥ 4♠ X P	1NT 3♠ P	2♥ 4♥ P	
W pluckycat		E Robot			
♠ AQ10532 ♥ K6 ♦ J62 ♣ KJ		♠ J87 ♥ 975 ♦ A7543 ♣ 82			
	S Hudson1000				
	♠ K9 ♥ AQ1083 ♦ KQ108 ♣ Q4				
		4♠x W NS: 0 EW: 0			

Anyway, that board and some poor declarer play by me contributed to a middling result of 53.15% and 11th out of 32. But I certainly hope the club runs the event again. My bot performed well. Its partner let it down. I hope for a chance to redeem myself in its eyes.

Fall 2020 NABC Robot Individual


The first session on Saturday started off well. I bid successfully to four slams in the first 20 boards and opened 1NT with 14 HCP to good effect a couple of times, but then, late in the round, I lost focus. I misplayed a part score, making two when I could have made four, then misdefended a doubled game contract, setting it only two instead of three. Both those boards cost me at total of 3% on my overall score. Then came the last of 24 boards.

I (and virtually everyone else) was in 3NT. My hand was ♠KJ9 ♥A9 ♦AK1054 ♣K54. Dummy was ♠865 ♥KQ104 ♦987 ♣A63. I received the ♣J lead. Plan the play.

Did I mention that I had lost focus? Well, as you will clearly see, I had. If you're counting, you have two diamond tricks, three heart tricks, and two club tricks for sure, and development possibilities in diamonds, hearts and spades. I won the ♣J with the ♣A in dummy and immediately finessed the ♦9 losing to the ♦J. Back came a club. I ducked and clubs were continued. I won with the ♣K. So now what?

"Bang down the ♦K, you dummy," my inner voice screamed. Or maybe your inner voice is more polite. Whatever. I ignored that voice. Somehow, I got it in my head that I needed to finesse again. Even if I did need to finesse again, banging down the ♦K would have revealed that. If diamonds were 3-2, I could then take my ♦A and the rest of the suit. If they were 4-1 onside, I could go to dummy and take the finesse. If they were 4-1 with both honors offside, well I was never going to get four diamond tricks. Anyway, I went to the board and took the losing finesse and now, in an absolutely cold contract, managed to go down one.

The full deal:

	N North	W	N	E	S
	♠ 865	P	P	P	1♦
	♥ KQ104	P	1♥	P	2NT
	♦ 987	P	3NT	P	P
♣ A63	P				
W West	E East				
♠ Q103	♠ A742				
♥ 865	♥ J972				
♦ QJ3	♦ 62				
♣ J1097	♣ Q82				
S South					
♠ KJ9					
♥ A3					
♦ AK1054					
♣ K54					
		3NT S		NS: 0 EW: 0	

My last board blues resulted in 2.56% for that board when I would have gotten slightly above average for making 3NT. The cost was 2% for my overall score. Nonetheless, I scored 62.84% for the round and ended up 165 out of 3033. Some of the 3259 who registered either never played or abandoned their rounds in despair. If I'd only played sensibly and with focus late in the round and on the last board, I easily could have had 68%.

Sunday's round started off well and then I picked up ♠A ♥J52 ♦AQJ1043 ♣A83. What do you open?

Well, if you've been paying attention to the last few articles, you, like me, would have opened 1NT—which is what I did. Passed out. Dummy came down: ♠Q3 ♥103 ♦8765 ♣J9765. Oops, I think.

A spade was led. I took the ♠A and started ♦A and ♦Q losing to the ♦K. Spades were run, then a heart to the ♥A. Then the East robot, who no doubt thought I had the ♥K and not six diamonds, led back a club. This hand is a good example of one of the advantages of off-shape 1NT bids in robot play. The robots are misled about your distribution. Making 1NT. The opponents only get four spades, a diamond, and a heart.

The full deal:

	N North ♠ Q3 ♥ 103 ♦ 8765 ♣ J9765	W N E S P P P 1NT
	W West ♠ J8754 ♥ K98764 ♦ 2 ♣ Q	E East ♠ K10962 ♥ AQ ♦ K9 ♣ K1042
	S South ♠ A ♥ J52 ♦ AQJ1043 ♣ A83	1NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

Now initially, I thought this would be a bad board but, upon analysis, I saw that had I opened a diamond, E-W would bid lots of spades, which is exactly what happened at other tables. E-W typically bid up to 4♠ and N-S bid 5♦, going down. The 1NT bid stopped E-W from bidding, as often happens with 1NT openers—another advantage to using them frequently. I got an unexpected 97.50% on the board.

Cruising along, a few boards later I picked up ♠Q5 ♥A9873 ♦Q9 ♣AQ53. Second hand, both vulnerable, I bid 1♥. Partner bid 3♥. What do you do?

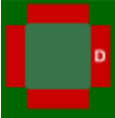
Well, I was feeling my oats at that point in the round and, while my hand wasn't ideal to bid game after a limit raise, the bridge gods seemed to be with me that day, so I bid 4♥.

Dummy came down with ♠K43 ♥Q652 ♦K8632 ♣J. The ♠A was led, (Yep, those robots frequently help you when they defend), followed by the ♣7, won by the ♣J in dummy. Plan the play.

I clearly wanted to ruff clubs in dummy, but I also thought I shouldn't be too eager to discard on the ♠K. Knowing robots' proclivities, if the ♦A is with East then, more than likely, it will duck if I lead a diamond off the board. And that's what happened. I led a spade to my ♠Q, ruffed a club, then led a low diamond to my ♦Q (East did duck). Now I led the ♣Q, and ruffed it with my ♥Q.

unnecessarily as it turns out. A low heart ruff would have sufficed, but I ruffed high because I wanted to give myself every chance to avoid a diamond loser, and I didn't mind losing two hearts because I thought bidding and making 4♥ was likely to be a good score. Having ruffed my last club except the ♣A, I played the ♠K pitching my last diamond, and then played a low heart to the ♥A, and another heart. Making 4♥.

The full deal:

	N Robot	W Robot	N Robot	E Robot	S pluckycat
	♠ K43 ♥ Q652 ♦ K8632 ♣ J	♠ 10986 ♥ K104 ♦ A107 ♣ 862	♠ AJ72 ♥ J ♦ J54 ♣ K10974	♠ Q5 ♥ A9873 ♦ Q9 ♣ AQ53	♠ 10986 ♥ K104 ♦ A107 ♣ 862
		P 3♥ P P P P P		P 1♥ P 4♥ P P P	
		4♥ S		NS: 0 EW: 0	

I was right that bidding and making 4♥ earned a good score. It was worth 96.25%. Lots of people were in four going down one or two. Turned out I was wrong about resting in 3♥. Bidding just three and making three was worth 82.50%. Too many people, like me, ignored the hands' warning signs, two doubleton queens and just an Ace without another honor in the trump suit. They also didn't take advantage of the robots' proclivities and manage the hand well enough to make four.

There's one more good and instructive hand from the round before the inevitable misadventures occur.

You have ♠AJ43 ♥A103 ♦3 ♣KQ862. No one is vulnerable and your RHO, in second seat, opened 1♦. You have an easy double. Passed to your partner bot, who bid 2NT, showing 11HCP, no four-card major, and a diamond stopper. I had the majors covered, so why not? I bid 3NT, liking my five-card club suit.

Dummy came down with ♠K74 ♥J5 ♦QJ10 ♣A10743. Turned out only half of the 60-person cohort I was in for this hand bid 3NT. About 35% of the cohort bid some number of clubs, usually three or four for a poor result, and 15% of the cohort rested in 2NT, also for a poor result. So, plan the play to make the most tricks at NT. You can count eight sure tricks. How do you go about making more?

The lead was the ♠10. I ducked in my hand, which was now dummy, and let the ♠10 ride around to my ♠K.

I wasn't too anxious to play clubs. I started diamonds and hoped that East would do something helpful. At worst, I'd make 9 tricks. East won with the ♦K and indeed did something very helpful

by playing the ♥K. I now saw my way clear to 10 tricks if I managed it right and got a little more help from my robot opponents. I won the ♥A and cashed three rounds of clubs, leaving myself entries to both declarer and dummy's hands and looking carefully at the robots' discards. Sure enough, both opponents discarded a heart, so I no longer had to be worried about a fourth heart cashing because it was almost certain that hearts were 4-4 in the defendants' hands. Moreover, West had shown up with the ♣J and, in light of the lead of the ♠10, I assigned West the ♠Q, leaving East with 11HCP and enough to open. I now led the ♦J, which East won with the ♦A and, bless its little artificial heart, decided—for some reason unknown to me except that robots rely on simulations—to cash the ♥Q and lead back a diamond. As I've said repeatedly, give robots a chance to go wrong defensively and you'll be rewarded disproportionately. I made 4NT. Five clubs, two hearts, a diamond, and two spades.

The full deal:

D	Robot	W	N	E	S
♠ K75	♥ J5	♠ P	♥ 1♦	♠ X	♥ 3NT
♦ QJ10	♣ A10743	♥ P	♠ 2NT	♥ P	♠ P
♣ P	♠ P	♠ P	♥ P	♠ P	♠ P
W Robot	E Robot				
♠ Q86	♠ 1092				
♥ 8642	♥ KQ97				
♦ 98642	♦ AK75				
♣ J	♣ 95				
S pluckycat					
♠ AJ43					
♥ A103					
♦ 3					
♣ KQ862					
		3NT N		NS: 0 EW: 0	

Only three others made four, so I received 96.15%,

Of the 24 boards, I had only two that were below average—one in the middle of the round where I lost my mind and again on the very last board. You'd think I would, by now, be on high alert when the last board arrived, but it wasn't to be.


First, an utter debacle: I ignored what I must have advised you about at least a dozen times.

As dealer, no one vulnerable, I held ♠AQ932 ♥A7 ♦A8 ♣Q864. Despite the five-card major, I have become enamored of opening such hands 1NT with robots and so I did that. The bidding:

W	N	E	S
			1NT
2♥	P	2NT	P
3♦	P	3♥	X
P	3♠	4♥	??

So, what do you do now? 2♥ was Cappelletti showing hearts and a minor, 2NT asked for the minor. 3♠ by my bot partner showed 3+♠ and 6- total points. I've consistently advised in robot play not selling out in competitive auctions when it's at all a close call and particularly when nonvulnerable. So, what do I do here but look at my three Aces and think my partner may have a defensive trick. No, no, a thousand times no. Rather, my thinking should have been that I'd be really unlikely to go down more than two even if doubled and my partner, with 6- total points, is really unlikely to have a defensive trick. Both opponents have shown 11+ total points. And clearly, the East bot liked what he heard about diamonds being his partner's minor suit. So, 4♥ appeared likely to make. Did I say brain dead? So, I passed. What did I get? 0% because 4♥ did make and nobody but me left their opponents in that contract when E-W reached it. It takes some doing to get 0% when more than 40 people play a hand. But I accomplished that, much to my chagrin. I should note that typically the hands in this tournament are compared to a different cohort of players for each hand and that cohort is usually between 40 and 60 players.

The full deal:

 D	N North ♠ K8764 ♥ 8432 ♦ 5 ♣ 972	W N E S 1NT 2♥ P 2NT P 3♦ P 3♥ X P 3♣ P P 4♥ P P P
	W West ♠ J105 ♥ KQJ9 ♦ KQ9732 ♣	E East ♠ ♥ 1065 ♦ J1064 ♣ AKJ1053
	S South ♠ AQ932 ♥ A7 ♦ A8 ♣ Q864	4♥ W NS: 0 EW: 0

The last hand found me in fourth seat, both nonvulnerable with ♠K64 ♥AK ♦Q7 ♣QJ10865. What did I open? 1NT, of course. My bot transferred me to hearts, I bid 2♥, which my bot passed only to have RHO bid 2♠. I wasn't going to sell out because I remembered all too well what I should have done on the previous board. So, I tried to save this by overbidding 3♣, which showed 4-5 clubs and 17 HCP—not what I had, but I was hoping to get away with it. My partner bot was having none of it and bid 3♥ where we rest. I can't avoid going down three.

The full deal:

	N North		W N E S
	♠ AJ9		P P P 1NT
	♥ J8743		P 2♦ P 2♥
	♦ 643		P P 2♣ 3♣
	♣ 43		P 3♥ P P
W West		E East	
♠ 32		♠ Q10875	
♥ Q96		♥ 1052	
♦ KJ1092		♦ A85	
♣ K97		♣ A2	
	S South		
	♠ K64		
	♥ AK		
	♦ Q7		
	♣ QJ10865		
		3♥ S	NS: 0 EW: 0

Last hand blues again. Most in 3♥ went down three and a few went down four. A handful who opened 1♣ and ended up in 3♥, found the opponents competing to 3♦, but after taking the ♦A on the opening lead, East got it in its head to lead the ♠Q, so those folks only went down 2. I received no such help and got 21.9% for going down three. Surprisingly, only about 40% of the cohort ended up in 3♣. If you went down two in 3♣ or 3♥, you got 64.10%. The half dozen that went down one got 92.31%.

I have no regret about my opening bid here. Live by the sword, die by the sword. Also, a number of folks who opened 1♣ ended up in 3♥. So it isn't clear that my opening bid made a difference in the final contract. Letting 2♠ play would have yielded a 33% result, so competing appeared to me, as usual, correct.

Anyway, I ended the session at 66.87%. For the two days, this put me at 30th overall among the 3033 players and 9th among those in the B strata with less than 2000 masterpoints. Going into the final on Monday, I had hopes for a high finish. Indeed, had I been a little better focused near the end of both sessions, in the immortal words of Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*, "I coulda been a contender."

Next week, I'll discuss how I did in the third session on Monday. In the meantime, hope you all had a safe and savory Thanksgiving.