

Playing with Robots

Part XV

By pluckycat

On July 11, 12, and 13, the ACBL held its summer 2020 Robot Individual Tournament on BBO. I thought participating would be a good way to test my skills and the knowledge and experience I'd acquired playing against robots. There were three sessions of 24 boards each on Saturday, Sunday and Monday. In this article, I'll explore some of the highlights and lowlights from the first session (mostly lowlights because how else do you try to learn).

At the end of this article is a copy of the interview on BBO of the winner, Jordan Chorodow, who averaged 68.35% on the three sessions, and one comment about the interview that I found particularly interesting. Jordan inhabits a completely different competitive world. For instance, I now play one daylong event on BBO perhaps once or twice a week; he plays five almost every day. Do read the interview; it's full of fascinating insights about who is at the top of the robot playing world. The person who came in second at 68.33%, Leo LaSota, is the Ace on BBO, the person with the most BBO points lifetime.

My preparation for the first day's play was less than optimal. Socially distanced golf in the morning on a sweltering day carrying my own bag for 18 holes, running errands in the afternoon, socializing in the evening, but enough sense for only one glass of wine and then sitting down to play at 9:45 p.m. (You had to complete the 24 boards by midnight.) Color me dumb. I forget, for optimal performance these sessions should be treated as athletic contests with some thoughtful mental and physical preparation. I did learn, however, from the first day, when I played 24 boards straight through while really tired. On the next two days, I played only 12 boards at a time with lengthy breaks and even a nap in between. In the next robot tournament, I'll play only eight boards at a time, play more daylongs in prep, read the robot system notes again, and remember key aspects of the tournament at all times, e.g., it is a tournament in which I, the non-robot, always have the best hand at the table. I need to remember that and make deductions from it. Do what you can to maintain focus and concentration. I remember that a study found that the mental strain of top-level bridge is the equivalent to that of doing surgery. Respect that.

Now to the first round. Right out of the box I had a decision to make: I held as South, nonvulnerable, ♠K94 ♥AK ♦AJ10976 ♣Q10. Two passes to me. What would you do?

I decided that 1NT best suited my hand. My partner bid two clubs. Doubled by RHO. 2♦ by me, 2NT by partner. I boldly (recklessly?) bid 3NT. West led the ♣5. Dummy came down: ♠J853 ♥J10976 ♦KQ5 ♣4. Uh-oh.

I sure didn't want to start with a bottom. West played the ♣K, hesitated half a beat and then...led back a low club. I could kiss it. I love robots. They trust you to make the right bid. And they make the right play. From the bidding, it looks like I have ♣Qxx or ♣QJx and West has three clubs so if it gets in, it will have a club to lead back. The W-E club holdings: W ♣J985, E ♣AK7632.

Further, I damn well should have had ♣Qxx or ♣QJx to bid 3NT after the robot's double of 2♣. And note that if East cashed the ♣AK, even if West had ♣Qxx, the suit, of course, would block. I take my ♣Q most gratefully. Then I cashed the A and K of hearts before beginning to run the diamonds because...you never know. Sure enough, East had the Q doubleton of hearts and I took 12 tricks. A disaster turned to a triumph. (Later, I found out only 5 of 46 in my cohort bid 3NT - for a 95% score.) Thank you again robots. Now if Jordan Chodorow, the champ, bid the way I did, I would say it's because of his deep knowledge of the robots' proclivities. I'm not nearly that smart.

Five boards later, I misplayed a hand in 1NT. I should have avoided the danger hand with long hearts and I had a way of doing that, but I didn't see it until I looked at the movie afterward. Making only 1NT gave me 48.81% on the board.

On the next board, I had a choice between a straightforward finesse and a ruffing finesse to make an overtrick. On the bidding, the straightforward finesse is a slight favorite. I expect deception so I take the ruffing finesse. Wrong. And costly: 19.05% instead of 67.22%. Lesson learned. Don't be cute. Make the right percentage play.

Late in the round, I misdefended a 1NT contract (27.33%), and failed to take an overtrick in a 4♥ contract when I intentionally left a trump outstanding when there was no need to do so (23.34%). "Tired bridge is not good bridge," I kept saying to myself as I pried open my eyelids.

Finally, near the very end of the round - this time unintentionally - I left a trump outstanding and went down in an ice-cold contract. Somehow, I got 6.10% on the board. I ended up at 54.91% for the session. By my calculation, I could have had 10% more by just avoiding the sloppy, careless errors.

Being an optimist by nature, I like the big lesson I learned. Online bridge tournaments against robots are not like face-to-face tournament bridge. I should - and later do - take advantage of that difference by playing no more than 12 boards at a time in the second and third sessions and resting myself mentally and restoring myself physically in between. In the second and third sessions, I scored 57.88% and 61.04% and finished just out of the top 10% of the 3242 participants. Next week, we'll look at some of the interesting boards from those sessions.

In the meantime, if you haven't read it, treat yourself to the interview of Jordan Chodorow below. Also read the comment after that. Enjoy and stay safe and healthy.

Jordan Chorodow Interview

Alex J. Coyne (AJC): Tell readers about yourself: Bridge player, but also a tax-law expert handling yacht, aircraft and art sales, as well as a professional film critic and four-time Crossword champion.

Jordan Chodorow (JC): My dad's a tax lawyer, so the one thing I knew growing up I'd never be is a tax lawyer. Of course, you know the rest. We work together and I'm glad to have the time with him.



My days as both a U.S. Open tennis umpire and a professional film critic are over, but I still see over 200 new movies a year (well, not this year...) and review them at jordanonfilm.com.

I did win four California crossword championships and remain the only cruciverbalist to complete a New York Times puzzle in under two minutes in live tournament competition.

AJC: When (and how) did playing bridge start?

JC: With friends at Haverford College. We had no clue what we were doing. ("Why did you redouble?" "I'm not telling.") Eventually my friend Alex Werner and I started to take it more seriously, wrote up system notes, and drove to Swarthmore for our first club game.

AJC: What pushed you to enter the NABC Robot Individual?

JC: I've entered all of them. To me, robot bridge is the purest, truest form of bridge. Don't get me wrong; I love live bridge and other forms of bridge on BBO, but they contain a huge element of chance (whom you play which boards against, which system they're using, how they choose to evaluate a hand, what mood they're in...). And a club game? You're a leaf in the wind.

AJC: Would you say that beating a bot is different to outsmarting a human opponent?

JC: I reject the premise. I did NOT "beat a bot." (Who would ever beat a bot? They're so sweet and cute.)

The robots are merely a conduit for a test of bridge skill in which, without sitting at your "table," every other human who entered is competing with and trying to outsmart you.

AJC: Does your life partner play bridge, too?

JC: Not even as a fourth.

Daniel's super chill. In twelve years together, we've never had a serious fight. We don't argue politics and even if he played bridge, we would never play together.

AJC: Did you have a playing, preparation or practice routine for the Bot Individual?

JC: Almost every day, I play the five 12-board ACBL daylongs and the 18-board daylong. I won half a dozen of those in the week leading up to the NABC, so I was in good form.

Occasionally I also play the SYC 18-board daylong; in fact, I won that the same day as the NABC. For the tournament, I find a time each day when I won't have any distractions for half an hour (generally the afternoon or evening at the end of each session).

AJC: Do you see more online and/or bot-driven bridge in the foreseeable future?

JC: I sure hope so. When the first NABC Robot Individual was announced as an experiment in conjunction with the Summer 2017 NABC in Toronto, Justin Lall wrote [[in a BridgeWinners comment](#) - AJC],

"Skill plays such a huge role in robot tournaments...especially in cardplay...I have no doubt that in this format it is more likely that the best player will win than in something like the Platinum Pairs...A

weak player literally has zero chance of lucking into a high placing in this. IMO, we may be going down the 'too much skill' hole."

And Roger Lee wrote,

"It is not possible to be good at bridge but bad against the robots. It is not possible to be good against the robots but bad at bridge. They are equivalent skills...The sheer density of decisions you have to make as the best-hand holder in a punishing format like MP means that someone who consistently makes better decisions will do better in the event...It is wrong to think that robot bridge is 'not bridge'...Being good at deduction, deception, logical inferences, general cardplay technique and having good overall bidding judgment are not just 'part' of the robot game, it is basically the entirety of the game. I hope people who belabor the small differences between robot bridge and normal duplicate bridge could find it in themselves to agree with that."

To that, I would only add that the top 40 finishers in this event hold a combined 38 NABC+ and 18 NABC titles, with many more among the remaining 3,202 players. That kind of competition is as serious as a heart attack.

AJC: Anything you'd like to add?

JC: Definitely. Though I take pride in the event itself, I sucked on Day 3, falling off more than 8% from my Day 2.

I'd been in high position after two days before (here I sat second), and yet again I hated my draw of Day 3 boards (defending ten times? blech). So in the second half of Day 3, I swung for a few fences (including two 7NT's in four hands). I was just hoping for a respectable placing when I idly checked the results and did a Danny Thomas spit take.

I also want to say a special word about Leo LaSota.

I've tried to imagine how I would have reacted had I posted the 68.33% and he the 68.35%, but Leo was the first to congratulate me and compliment my cardplay. I'm not sure I could have mustered

such equanimity, let alone such class, especially when we all know Leo is the king. (This win gets me to within approximately 1,000 masterpoints of him for the month.)

Thank you to everyone who has sent along good wishes.

Comment:

No. Robot bridge is not real bridge. You know you have more high-card points than any other hand so you, naturally, use that information both in bidding and in the play of the hand; however no other hand/bot at the table is programmed to know that information and cannot use it to similar advantage. Further, all bots "alert" all bids from the perspective of the bidding bot not just the bot's partner's understanding of the "agreement."

None of these takes away from the significance of your accomplishment, though, because every other live player knows these things and uses them. Congratulations.