

Playing with Robots

IX

By pluckycat

Every once in a while, when I don't have a partner, I need a respite from playing with robots, so I turn, as I mentioned in *Playing with Robots V*, to the individual game. This is where you have four different partners for three hands each in a speedball format. The games, which are listed as **Ind. ACBL** in ACBL World, can either be matchpoints or imps. For \$1.25 you get an hour's worth of rollercoaster rides with the accompanying thrills and chills. After an hour, I'm usually more than ready to return to playing with robots. But, for this week, we'll follow my adventures -- mostly misadventures -- with humans and see what we can learn. One of my favorite movies is "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," an iconic Clint Eastwood spaghetti western. But here we'll just have the bad, the ugly and the truly ugly.

Let's start with the truly ugly (now remember all you know about your partners is what they tell you in their profiles, which you may or may not be able to trust. I find "Expert" designations least trustworthy, and some "Beginners" turn out to be awfully good -- to be taken advantage of only at your own peril. These are the vagaries of playing online.

Both vulnerable, the bidding goes 3♥, pass, pass, to you. You hold: ♠Q10 ♥10 ♦KJ52 ♣AK9875. You ponder a bit and bid 4♣. Your partner decides to bid four spades. You think, for a moment -- before her cards appear -- that this might turn out just fine. Then she reveals this hand: ♠J7632 ♥AK853 ♦Q4 ♣2. Uh-oh. This is going to be a long round. I want to write in the chat box, "please don't rescue me on dogpoo," but I decide that remaining a member of BBO matters for now. Sure enough, she goes down 4 for a bottom, while 4♣ would have gone down only one for 55%. Only one brave soul doubled the 3♥ opener to good effect. Lesson: Don't rescue partner without a really, really good reason. Here, I would have doubled with one more spade and one less club. So partner can figure out I almost certainly don't have three spades. Also, the spades are likely to break badly (as they did -- 5-1). And if ever there was a moth-eaten suit, it was her spade suit.

So that was the first board with this partner. Truly ugly got even uglier, if that's possible, on the next board with her. E-W was vulnerable.

The bidding:

| N | E | S | W |
|----------|----|------|-----|
| | 1♠ | Pass | 2♦ |
| 3♣ | 3♦ | Pass | 3NT |
| All pass | | | |

Your partner (North) is on lead with ♠A65 ♥A1087 ♦2 ♣A9753. Bet you can't guess the lead. You get two guesses. A low heart would have been my choice; possibly even a low club. Wrong. It was a low spade. Dummy appears: ♠QJ872 ♥J ♦AQ863 ♣86.

On my partner's low spade lead, I play the 9, taken by the K. Declarer returns a low spade and my partner hops up with her Ace. Now what to lead? She decides on the ♣A. She sees the ♣Q from partner. She now has had three chances to get it right -- on opening lead, after taking the ♠A and after taking the ♣A. As I watch this, my roller coaster is tentatively going up each time she's on lead, only to go down precipitously a moment later. Then, after she takes the ♣A and continues with another club, my roller coaster makes the last monster steep decline into what seems like oblivion, at least for this session. 3NT making five is another cold bottom when we can take the first nine tricks.

Lots to comment on. One: note the weak opener by East. Happens a lot online. Partner's bidding also left something to be desired. If she's going to bid, which I certainly would when not vulnerable, why not double with 5 diamonds and 4 hearts? We'll end up in some number of hearts, making 4 for an excellent score. And why, pray tell, is there not a heart lead after hearing the bidding and certainly after seeing dummy? Lots of lessons, painfully observed. The full deal:

| | |
|---------|--------|
| North | |
| ♠A65 | |
| ♥A1087 | |
| ♦2 | |
| ♣A9753 | |
| West | East |
| ♠K3 | ♠QJ872 |
| ♥Q5 | ♥J |
| ♦KJ975 | ♦AQ863 |
| ♣K1075 | ♣86 |
| South | |
| ♠1094 | |
| ♥K96432 | |
| ♦107 | |
| ♣QJ | |

Time to turn to the merely ugly. In a different session of an individual competition, for the first nine boards, things couldn't have gone better. Somewhat unbelievably I was above 80%. Playing with those three partners was a real pleasure. One apologized for bidding

only 6, which received 78%, when 7 was cold -- as was 6NT. Then, this hand came along with IAM007 as my partner. He was truly a licensed assassin and he just killed me.

On the first hand (#10 of 12), both vulnerable, he opened 1♦ with ♠965 ♥A64 ♦A9764 ♣Q7. Pass by East. I bid 2♠, surely to be understood as weak and preemptive. West now bid 2NT, which East raised to 3NT. The James Bond wannabe was not about to keep his powder dry. So, despite his subminimal opening in first seat and relatively balanced hand, he bid 4 spades. Doubled and down 3 for a cold bottom. The full deal:

North
♠AK3
♥Q875
♦KQ
♣K1053

| West | East |
|----------|--------|
| ♠J108742 | ♠965 |
| ♥K3 | ♥A64 |
| ♦52 | ♦A9764 |
| ♣842 | ♣Q7 |

South
♠Q
♥J1092
♦J1083
♣AJ96

I did manage to ruff a club in dummy but the 3-1 spade break did me in. It appears IAM007 was having a mediocre round and was hoping for a top. What obligation do you have to your partner not to play for tops and bottoms? None, it appears from this board and others. Hence, the roller coaster experience. If N-S had been allowed to play in 3NT, we would have got a slightly below average board.

IAM007 proceeded to make a bad lead on the next hand resulting in an overtrick for opponents. He then managed to botch a hand so badly that he went down two when most were making with an overtrick. On the three boards, we averaged 6% and I ended up with a 62% game. Humans can be much more aggravating than robots. Without good reason, my expectations for them were higher.

Now for the bad. This was another painfully instructive hand. The hope is to remember the lessons learned for at least a little while. Here, I forgot to apply a lesson I had long since learned and turned a potential top into a bottom.

The bidding, with no one vulnerable:

| | | | |
|---|---|----|----|
| N | E | S | W |
| | | 2♥ | 2♠ |

3♥ 3NT All pass

I held ♠7 ♥K109752 ♦Q1083 ♣102. What to lead on that bidding?

The odds are that East has a long minor, here a club suit. He also is likely to have at least one heart stopper, but maybe only one, and with my partner's bid maybe hearts is the safest and best lead. Bad. Wrong. A diamond sets the contract two, while a heart lead allows the opponents to make 7 NT for a near top. Most pairs played in 4♠, making 6 after a diamond lead. I'm not sure I wouldn't have bid 4♠ after East's 3NT bid. That's trusting an unknown partner. Here, the lesson I've learned is that a NT bidder usually has your partnership's bid suit stopped, often twice. So, if there's another good option, it may well be worth taking. Here there clearly was, since I was the one bidding hearts with some holes. Again, online, whether by the masters of robot play or by humans, 3NT appears to be bid with some frequency without a stopper in one suit. The full deal:

North
♠1062
♥J9
♦AK9764
♣43

| | |
|----------|---------|
| West | East |
| ♠AKQ9853 | ♠J4 |
| ♥Q3 | ♥A86 |
| ♦J | ♦52 |
| ♣J85 | ♣AKQ976 |

South
♠7
♥K109752
♦Q1083
♣102

Next week, back to playing with robots, a much more predictable and less frustrating species.