

Playing with Robots

Part XXXVII

By pluckycat

Happy New Year, everyone!!

The Roman god Janus is the two-faced god, looking backward and forward, conventionally associated with January, so there's no better time than now for reflection, to review what we've learned about playing with robots, and to look ahead. In this article, therefore, I intend to review some of the key fundamentals of playing with robots and to illustrate a few of those fundamentals with selected hands.

I did also want to thank those who wrote to me last week in response to my Christmas request. Your comments were very much appreciated. One comment particularly resonated. It was a request to spend more time elucidating the fundamentals of robot play. So, in honor of this devoted reader—and Janus—here we go.

I did review some tips for playing with robots in article XXXI, and my early articles spent a good deal of time reviewing the system notes associated with playing with robots on BBO. (See [articles I-V](#).) Nonetheless, there's more to be said. Oh, and I made a New Year's resolution, so the future is also addressed. It's simply to devote some of my playing time with robots to just having fun and experimenting. In my desire to compete and be competitive, I too often forget what continually draws me to this fascinating game—whether playing with humans or robots. It is endlessly fun and entertaining. For me, that's worth remembering. Maybe for you too. 😊

Some Ruminations About Leads

As I've mentioned, robots rarely lead away from unsupported honors. So, if you're thinking of taking that immediate finesse in dummy, don't if it can be avoided or postponed. Robots also very much like to lead singletons if they have one. Also, robots tend to make passive leads, particularly against no trump contracts, so it's worth trying to figure out why a robot led what it led. Remember too that you're almost certainly playing a best-hand tournament against the bots, so no bot has a hand that has more high-card points than your hand. It can only, at best, have as many as you. Knowing that often helps in declarer play, but also can guide you in assessing the bot's opening lead. Honor leads almost invariably have the next lower honor in hand—unless they're singletons.

A Few Thoughts on Declarer Play

Robots like covering honors with honors, but don't insult their intelligence. If you have AJxx opposite K109x in dummy, don't lead the Jack from your hand to discover the Queen. The robot can see that covering is futile, but do lead the 10 from dummy; more than likely you'll induce a cover of the ten. It pays to duck a trick whenever you can. Robots often switch and make helpful leads.

Some Hints About Bidding

Be particularly careful when you have a good hand—17+ HCPs—are vulnerable and your robot partner is silent. It's often a trap for the unwary, particularly if you've doubled. It's one of the situations in which robots will double if you extend yourself. If you've already bid your hand, leave it to your robot partner to determine how competitive your pair should be. If you repeat your values, your robot will think you have more and will put you in a contract you didn't want to be in. When you can, it's also advisable to win the auction unless there are clear signs you may be going for a big number if you bid, e.g., partner has been silent and you're vulnerable. Robots, particularly my robot partners (and friends uniformly tell me their robot partners too), defend badly. Moreover, these are likely to be distributional hands, which allow both sides to take lots of tricks. So be very leery of doubling a robot's contract. If your bot doubles for penalties, however, its judgment is usually good.

Bid 1NT with a balanced 14 HCPs and 2NT with 19 HCPs.

While we're talking about bidding, here's a hand that illustrates why I've become particularly enamored of opening 1NT with 14 HCPs when playing with robots.

Both vulnerable, you're dealt ♠Q109 ♥QJ8 ♦A76 ♣KQ75

In second seat, without hesitation, I opened 1NT. 2♣ by my partner, 2♦ by me, 3NT by my partner ended the auction. Dummy came down with ♠K532 ♥K52 ♦KJ43 ♣64. You receive a low club lead. Plan the play after East wins the ♣A and switches to a low heart.

I had two club tricks, two heart tricks, two diamond tricks and at least one spade trick. East didn't open the bidding, so in this best-hand tournament, it doesn't have three Aces, although his heart switch likely marks it with the ♥A. There's no rush to take the diamond finesse. If East has two Aces, it certainly has room for the ♦Q. I think it best to start spades, so I led the ♠10 hoping for a cover by West with the ♠J. Sure enough, it covered and now I had two spade tricks and, when I continued spades, they turned out to be 3-3, so I had 9 tricks.

The full deal:

	N Robot	W N E S
	♠ K532 ♥ K52 ♦ KJ43 ♣ 64	P P P P 2♣ P P 3NT P P P P
W Robot	E Robot	
♠ AJ4 ♥ 63 ♦ 1092 ♣ J10932	♠ 876 ♥ A10974 ♦ Q85 ♣ A8	
S pluckycat		
♠ Q109 ♥ QJ8 ♦ A76 ♣ KQ75		3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

I received 9.93 IMPs and, in matchpoints, would have gotten 96%. Only one other person bid and made game. Almost everyone else rested in 1NT after opening 1♣, hearing a 1♠ response and then bidding 1NT. This hand represents another triumph for opening 1NT with a 14 HCP hand. I find I frequently end up in 3NT when others don't and I usually have a good play for it. The hand also illustrates that robots usually cover honors with honors and the help that can come from knowing you're in a best-hand tournament.

The next deal illustrates another key aspect of bidding in robot play. In fourth seat, after three passes, both vulnerable, I held ♠AK643 ♥7 ♦862 ♣AQ62.

I opened 1♠. Partner bid 1NT. I responded 2♣ and partner invited with 2NT, showing 2-♠, 4-♣ and 10-11 HCP and 12-total points. This is not an infrequent auction. I have nothing extra. Nonetheless, I almost invariably accept such invitations in robot play. Why? I had a five-card suit with primes on top and, with that, I felt I should have a decent shot at nine tricks, particularly since robots are not great defenders. They proved me right.

The full deal:

D	N Robot	W Robot	N Robot	E Robot	S
	♠ 108	♠ Q75	♠ J92	♠ J92	
	♥ K10932	♥ AJ54	♥ Q86	♥ Q86	
	♦ AQ4	♦ K975	♦ J103	♦ J103	
	♣ J74	♣ 103	♣ K985	♣ K985	
			S pluckycat		
			♠ AK643		
			♥ 7		
			♦ 862		
			♣ AQ62		
				3NT N	NS: 0 EW: 0

The ♣10 was led. I covered it with the ♣J. Inexplicably, East didn't put up the ♣K. Seeking to develop spades, I led the ♠10, hoping for a cover that I could duck to keep the lead in East. Sure enough, East put up the ♠J, which I ducked. It then helpfully led back a diamond. I now had four spades, three clubs and two diamonds and didn't need to worry about hearts. I was the only one bidding and making 3NT for 10.5 IMPs or 100% of the matchpoints. No one else bid 3NT and only one other person made it. Was my bid ill-advised? In matchpoints, almost certainly, because I would have tied for top just taking nine tricks. In IMPs, no, because the reward for making a game, particularly a vulnerable game, is so great. And here, if I had failed, I would only have been down 3 or 4 IMPs. The risk-reward calculus militates in favor of stretching for games and slams in IMPs, while being more conservative in matchpoints.

The last hand this week illustrates an example of this risk-reward calculus when it comes to slam bidding. Your partner opens 1♦, right hand opponent leaps to 4♣. Vulnerable versus not, you hold ♠A953 ♥AKQ53 ♦K862 ♣. What do you bid?

This hand had slam written all over it for me. Maybe even a grand. How do you get to slam?

I considered only two bids—double or 5♣. But the 5♣ bid shows 5+♦ and 17+ HCP points. Not quite what I had hoped for. Double isn't much, if any, better, but at least it doesn't exaggerate my diamond length and allows partner to bid at the four level. It simply shows 13+HCP points, 14+ total points. I chose to double and when my robot partner bid 4♦ showing 4+♦ and nothing more, I simply carried on to 6♦, fearing I had missed a grand slam, but seeing no good way to find out what I needed to know.

The full deal:

D	N Robot	W	N	E	S
♠ K62	♠ K62	P	1♦	4♣	X
♥ 864	♥ 864	P	4♦	P	6♦
♦ AQJ54	♦ AQJ54	P	P	P	P
♣ K4	♣ K4				
W Robot	E Robot				
♠ J107	♠ Q84				
♥ J1097	♥ 2				
♦ 973	♦ 10				
♣ J95	♣ AQ1087632				
S pluckycat					
♠ A953					
♥ AKQ53					
♦ K862					
♣					
		6♦ N	NS: 0 EW:		

Only three of 15 players bid 6♦. And two of those only took 12 tricks. The ♣A was led by East and a heart ruff established the hearts for a spade discard to make seven, yet two of those in 6♦ didn't find that. So, 6♦, making seven, was worth 9.07 IMPs or 96% in matchpoints. More than half the field was in 4♥ and never gave slam a sniff after bidding 4♥ over 4♣. The fundamental point here is that robot play offers far more opportunities to bid and make slam than ordinary human face-to-face play. One should look for them and not be timid.

Enough fundamentals for now. I hope the new year exceeds your expectations. In the meantime, have loads of fun playing bridge.