

Playing with Robots

Part VII

By pluckycat

The other day, I played in a daylong BBO MP tournament for \$.39. There were 1353 participants. I finished at 67.2%, received 6.14 BBO points and came in 64th. Pretty good, I thought, but then I looked at the person who came in first - "usla" at 82.54% received 14.43 BBO points. Humbling. But how in the world does a person score 82.54 %? I also noted that I'd seen usla at or near the top of a number of leaderboards. I set out to find out why by reviewing the 8 boards he played in this contest (which were different from the ones I played). What a revelation!

On five of the 8 boards, usla scored 98.48%, 98.28%, 97.5%%, 98.21%, and 95.83%. I'm going to give you an opportunity to try to match wits with usla. I'll give you his hand for each of the boards he scored in the high 90s on and you decide what you'd bid. Usla is a Romanian who's a K on BBO, which means he's amassed enough BBO points to rank among the top 30 players lifetime on BBO - further confirmation that the scores he achieves are not flukes.

You are South throughout.

Board 1. Both non-vulnerable, you hold ♠AQ942, ♥AK, ♦1032, ♣653. Two passes to you. What's your first bid? And after partner bids 2♣, what's your second bid?

Board 2. Vulnerable against non, you hold ♠102, ♥Q1065, ♦AQ73, ♣KQ3. Partner bids 1♦, RHO passes. What do you bid?

Board 3. Non-vulnerable v. vulnerable, you hold ♠AQ102, ♥Q875, ♦J5, ♣KQ5. RHO passes. What do you bid?

Board 4. Everyone vulnerable, you hold ♠10852, ♥A5, ♦8, ♣AKQJ92. You're the dealer. What do you bid?

Board 5. No one vulnerable, you hold ♠AJ2, ♥A105, ♦Q32, ♣AJ76? LHO opens 3♦, two passes to you. What do you bid in balancing seat?

What usla did

Board 1: Both non-vulnerable, you hold ♠AQ942, ♥AK, ♦1032, ♣653. Two passes to you. What's your first bid? And after partner bids 2♣, what's your second bid?

The full hand: North ♠K85, ♥873, ♦J5, ♣AQJ84; East ♠73, ♥J542, ♦KQ864, ♣K10; South ♠AQ943, ♥AK, ♦1032, ♣653; West ♠J106, ♥Q1096, ♦A97, ♣972.

The bidding: Pass - Pass - 1♣! - Pass - 2♣ - Pass - 2♦!! - Pass - 3♣ - Pass - 3NT. Clearly, usla is playing a different game than I do with robots. And I start thinking that I'm playing checkers and he's playing chess and utilizing a deeper knowledge of the robots' proclivities. What the 2♦ bid showed when you click it is, "new suit, 3+ clubs, 11-21 HCP, 12-22 total points, stopper in diamonds, forcing to 2NT." So, not surprisingly, West led a heart. Usla won with the ♥A and played a club, losing to the ♣K. Now East played the ♦K, and saw the ♦7 come from partner. Now, based on the bidding, East must have thought South had the ♦A and switched to a heart. End of defense. Making 5 NT, along with one other player in this group, for 98.48%. The best six other players could do was bid and make 4♠. Will you be bold enough to put deterrent bids in your repertoire? Will you know when to pick your spots to do so?

Board 2: Vulnerable against non, you hold ♠102, ♥Q1065, ♦AQ73, ♣KQ3. Partner bids 1♦, RHO passes. What do you bid?

Our intrepid warrior bid 3NT, taking a page out of Alfred E. Neuman's book, "What, Me Worry?" Who needs to be concerned about a little thing like a spade stopper? Watching usla bid makes me think I'm reading about bridge in Mad Magazine - crazy, but genius. (Be careful if you try this at home. It may blow up in your face.) But usla's bid, when clicked, shows at least partial stoppers in all the unbid suits.

The full deal: North ♠K86, ♥J42, ♦KJ64, ♣AJ9; East ♠93, ♥AK98, ♦9852, ♣742; South ♠102, ♥Q1065, ♦AQ73, ♣KQ3; West ♠AQJ754, ♥73, ♦10, ♣10865

So what's an intelligent robot like West supposed to think on lead? It thinks that South has the ♠K and if it can get East on lead, well then, bingo! So, West led the ♥7. East won the ♥K, looked at dummy and, since the ♥7 was not significant, led back the ♥8 hoping, no doubt, to establish his fourth heart at worst. Curtains for the defense; North won and led back another heart. Making four. 25% of the field played 3NT from the North, making three, because South typically bid 1♥ after the 1♦ opening and West of course got in a spade bid. Making 3NT from the North side was worth 79%. All others did worse. Usla, playing from the South received 98.268%.

Board 3: Non-vulnerable v. vulnerable, you hold ♠AQ102, ♥Q875, ♦J5, ♣KQ5. RHO passes. What do you bid?

Of course, now clued into the value of deterrent bids, you bid 1♦. (Opponents passed throughout.) Partner bid 1♥ and, with your kind of mediocre 14 HCP, you bid 3NT. Clicking on what that bid means, you see - and the other robots know - that it shows 11-21 HCP, a solid 7-card diamond suit (no, I didn't mistype that, nor did you misread it), partial stoppers in clubs, and partial stoppers in spades.

The full deal: North ♠98, ♥A1063, ♦Q3, ♣A10972; East ♠KJ753, ♥J2, ♦K4, ♣8643; South ♠AQ102, ♥Q875, ♦J9, ♣KQ5; West ♠64, ♥K94, ♦A1087652, ♣J

So, what was poor West to lead with his seven bagger in diamonds? You almost feel sorry for the poor dear. Clearly it had to be thinking that South had ♦KQJ9 fifth - at least - of diamonds. So, with no good option as it saw it, West ventured the ♣J. Usla won in hand, led a club to the board and a heart back, finessing the ♥8. Now, robot West thought South was trying to set up his fourth heart, so, poor befuddled robot, it led back the ♥K. Curtains. It's amazing how often a robot defender does something like the lead of the ♥K, again taking clues from the bidding and play and running simulations rapidly through its computer brain. Anyway, only two players were in 3NT. Usla received 97.50% because the other person, on identical bidding and the same lead, managed to make six. I didn't even want to know how.

Board 4: Everyone vulnerable, you hold ♠10852, ♥A5, ♦8, ♣AKQJ92. You're the dealer. What do you bid?

Is there any doubt at this point what you would bid? What else but 1♦? Surely you weren't thinking of something pedestrian like a club. Deterrence apparently is the name of this game. So now (opponents passed throughout), partner responded 1♠. Usla bid 4♠, which the robots knew to be "a double jump raise, 3+ diamonds, 4+ spades, 21+ HCP and 19-22 total points." Certainly, usla recognized the playing strength of the hand. Now, with that information, robot partner bid 4NT - Blackwood - and finding partner with two Aces, bid 6♠.

The full hand: North ♠AKQ97, ♥Q74, ♦4, ♣8743; East ♠63, ♥K1098, ♦J108632, ♣6; South ♠10852, ♥A5, ♦8, ♣AKQJ92; West ♠J4, ♥J632, ♦AK975, ♣105

There was nothing to the play. Two players bid 6♠, 1 bid 6♣. Everyone else bid a pedestrian 4♠ - for 44%.

Board 5: No one vulnerable, you hold ♠AJ2, ♥A105, ♦Q32, ♣AJ76? LHO opens 3♦, two passes to you. What do you bid in balancing seat?

Again, not particularly worried about a stopper, our stalwart bid 3NT after the diamond opening. Pass by opener and partner bid 4♥, passed out.

The full hand: North ♠K85, ♥J76432, ♦A, ♣K95; East ♠Q963, ♥KQ9, ♦87, ♣10832; South ♠AJ2, ♥A105, ♦Q32, ♣AJ76; West ♠1074, ♥8, ♦KJ109654, ♣Q4

Here everyone reached 4♥, most after a double by South, but the play was the determining factor of the result. How would you play the hand?

Only 3 of 25 pairs made six, like usla. The diamond opening lead was taken by the Ace. ♥J was played back, covered by the ♥Q and taken by the ♥A. Now the critical play. A low club was led and covered by the ♣Q and ♣K. Often a doubleton queen seems to be offside when playing with robots, when a critical side suit finesse is at issue. A heart back was taken by the ♥K and now usla had 12 tricks: 5 hearts, 3 clubs, a diamond and the spade finesse that worked for three

spades. Rarely have I found that a suit combination like clubs will yield a winning finesse or be divided 3-3. Also, robots tend to rise with doubleton honors. So usla's play in clubs cried out to him (and to me). But again 88% of everyone else took the club finesse, which is why usla scored over 95%.

Next week, we'll plumb further into the machinations of the BBO superstars. In the meantime, you might give some of their tactics a try. Bridge is supposed to be fun, particularly with robots. No partner to disappoint and cause to have raised eyebrows. So have fun. I can tell you that I've tried some of usla's tactics in a modest way, bidding NT with a mediocre 14 count, bidding the short minor on occasion, but mostly being very conscious of what robots do in the play and what message my bid is sending. Sometimes those bidding tactics don't work; clearly usla recognizes patterns and opportunities that I do not. But I'll continue to try to find keys to unlocking the secrets of usla and his ilk. See you next week.