Playing with Robots

Part XXIX

By pluckycat

Last week, I was looking for ways to avoid news regarding the run-up to the election in any way I could. I was, in other words, looking to put myself in as much of a coma as I could. BBO provided a wonderful opportunity to do just that. Last week (October 26 to November 1), BBO ran three worldwide robot games that you could play in as an individual. I played them all. The first was Bridge International Championship (BIC), which 4200 players entered. The second was the Transnational survivor event, which had 765 entrants; 20% were eliminated each day, leaving 202 to fight it out on the last day. Then there was the Bridge International Mini-Championship for those with fewer than 1000 BBO points. 843 entered that event. Here, you could play one 12-board session each day for seven days and your best four 12-board sessions were counted. I'll be talking about some of the lessons learned from these three humbling experiences and give you a chance to be a hero on the last round.

The main event—the BIC Championship—required that you compete against the best in the world at robot play in at least ten 12-board sessions and average 55% in those ten sessions to qualify for the final. Monday through Thursday, you could play as many as 25 sessions a day to qualify and improve your scores. I was one of 419 people who qualified for the final, which involved six sessions on Saturday and Sunday, of which only four would count. I confess to playing a total of 18 sessions of 12 boards to reach an average of 55% to qualify for the final. Invariably, I would do something foolish to turn a 60% game into a low 50%, so I'd need to play another session to ultimately reach a 55% average. I also neglected my own advice for playing in tournaments—to get ample rest, take breaks and play when most alert. Fatigue inevitably played a role, particularly since I was still playing in my regular HBC games with my regular partners and then playing in these BBO tournaments late at night. On several days, I played more than 100 boards a day. Several times, despite having my setting on confirm bids and plays, I mis-clicked. Indeed, twice I inadvertently bid 2♣ when I meant to bid 1♣. It's particularly hard to recover from that with robots.

I was also out of my league. The lead qualifier was my old friend Usla, with a nearly 70% average in qualifying, with an extraordinary session of 89.93%, which I will look at next week. In any event, in the finals, I ended up averaging somewhat more than 50% on the four boards that mattered to place well down in the field.

In the Transnational Survivor event, I had no difficulty avoiding the cut every day. The final on Sunday was disappointing. I played very badly on five of the 18 boards, to come in 47th of 202 survivors. In second seat, I sleepily opened an 8HCP balanced hand (I swear I saw an Ace that I later learned didn't exist) and then didn't pass my partner's 1NT bid to get a near bottom. I stretched to a slam that was on a finesse that didn't succeed for another near bottom. I misplayed a 4♠ contract that should make two overtricks for another near bottom. Then, despite all my advice to you about listening to the robot's bids, I masterminded the hand and ignored a robot's

forcing bid, passed and ended up with the zero I deserved. And finally, on the last board, trying to salvage something more from the round, I stretched to another unmakeable game for a near bottom. Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, the evening was a smashing success. And, by the way, the rest of the round was successful enough to allow me to finish in the top quarter of the field despite those five awful boards that were self-inflicted. Another opportunity to do really well, squandered.

So now on to the Mini-Championship. Here too, I was frustrated by my play and was 87th going into the last round on Sunday with a chance to improve by doing well in Sunday's last session. We'll look at three of the 12 boards and I'll tell you about the other nine boards I knew I had done well on (turns out I had averaged 78%).

The first of the challenging boards finds you with: ♠A107 ♥AQ103 ♦A752 ♣KJ. In second seat, NV v. Vul, I opened 1♦. LHO overcalled 1♥ and my partner bid 2♥, which is a limit raise or better, 4+♦ and 11+ total points. Okay, I don't think slam is there, but 3NT perfectly describes my hand as 18-19 HCP and stops in hearts. What could go wrong? Well my bot now bid 5♣. Huh? So, what do you do now?

I click on the bid and it reveals 5+♣, 4+♦, and 11+total points.

Again, what now?

I don't give its bid the thought I should. What is my bot's hand likely to be? Must be unbalanced with a possible void. But that thought comes too late, and in real time, I simply corrected to 5♦ since we have at least an 8-card fit in diamonds. That has to be safer.

Oops. My bot now bid 6♣. Oh no. I belatedly look at what my 5♦ bid means to my bot. It's a cue bid, showing the ♦A, 19HCP and, most importantly, it's forcing, which is why my bot bid 6♣. I feel really foolish for not following the advice I repeatedly give others: Look at what your bid means to your robot partner.

So now I tried to rescue the board by bidding 6NT. No dice. The ♣A and ♣Q are behind my ♣KJ. Neither 6♣s nor 6NT makes.
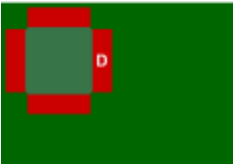
Here is the full deal:

A heart was led and I managed to go down one for 35.04%. Had I passed 5♣, I would have gotten 67.12%. Had I really had my thinking cap on, I would have bid 5NT instead of 5♦, which the bot would have passed as bots did, for 6 of the 128 folks who bid exactly as I did up to my 5♦. Bidding 5NT earned 88.19%. Did you bid 5NT?

Late in the round, I'm confronted by a play problem which I certainly didn't ace. Let's see if you can do better. Two-thirds of the field is in 2♥ like me. One-third overbid to 4♥ and got what they deserved—20% on the board. I opened 1♥, LHO overcalled 1♠ and my partner bid 2♥, which ended the auction.

My hand was ♠A1074 ♥AK943 ♦K4 ♣109. Dummy was ♠Q2 ♥QJ5 ♦1032 ♣A8643. You receive the ♥7 lead.

Here is the full deal. Plan the play.

Well, if you paid attention to the bidding, unlike me, you would have let the ♥7 run around to your ♥9 and immediately played a spade, counting on LHO to have the ♠K, as it should. Then you can ruff a spade in dummy and make 3♥ for 82.46%. Me? I won the ♥Q in dummy and immediately played a diamond to the ♦K, which lost to the ♦A. Now, I couldn't ruff a spade as the defense continued hearts. Making two got me 53.42%. Did I say it was late in the round where I find that focus is sometimes hard to maintain?

Now, we come to the last hand. Here, I have ♠K107 ♥AJ83 ♦AQ82 ♣A3. In fourth seat, Vul v. NV, I opened 1♦. Partner bid 1♥. What do you bid now?

I decide that I should invite and bid 3♥. In hindsight, I realized I should have bid 4♥. I had lots of prime values, good linkage with honors and some ruffing value. I don't need much from partner.

Indeed, a couple of kings might well yield game. But partner will pass my invitation with that hand. Sure enough, that's what happened. And we made five.

The full deal:

N	North			W	N	E	S
	♠ 6432			P	P	P	1♦
	♥ K10964			P	1♥	P	3♥
	♦ K3			P	P	P	
	♣ 82						

W	West			E	East
	♠ A5				♠ QJ98
	♥ 72				♥ Q5
	♦ J964				♦ 1075
	♣ KQ1065				♣ J974

S	South		
	♠ K107		
	♥ AJ83		
	♦ AQ82		
	♣ A3	3♥ N	NS: 0 EW: 0

Not much to the play. I get the ♥Q lead (I would have played for the 2-2 splint anyway). Draw trump, pitch a club on my diamond, strip the hand of clubs and diamonds, ending up in declarer's hand and lead a spade to the 10♠. If East played an honor, I would cover. East did not and I inserted the ♠10 and had to make my ♠K for my 11th trick.

Making five when bidding three was worth 35.09%. Bidding four and making five was worth 82.89%. My three letdowns on these boards were costly. I finished at 70.27%. That moved me up to 47th out of the 863 that entered. Had I played and bid better, I would have finished at 80%, first for the session and 15th overall and had the satisfaction of knowing that on those rare occasions when my game is purring along smoothly on all cylinders, I am capable of really good scores.

The good thing is that BBO continually provides opportunities to test yourself and what you have learned about playing with robots. Now, if I could only remember those lessons in the crucible of play. This weekend offers yet another opportunity in the NABC Robot Individual practice sessions as prelude to the Robot Individual Nationals later this month. The practice sessions are free. Look at the News on BBO for details.

Stay safe and healthy.