Playing with Robots

Part XXIV

By pluckycat

Last week, I analyzed the bidding and play of Usla, the Romanian expert who's accumulated the second most masterpoints lifetime on BBO. This week, I continue the analysis of an eight-board round, in which Usla scored 81.32%, with an eye toward gleaning the lessons to be gained and which, if any, are translatable to play with human partners.

Board 5

On Board 5, vulnerable v. nonvulnerable, in third seat after two passes, Usla found himself with

♠KQJ4 ♥Q ♦AQ543 ♣QJ6.

What did he open?

I bet some of you guessed 1NT. Wrong. Some of you guessed 1♦, I'm sure. Wrong again. Usla opened 1♣, perhaps to hide his club weakness as well as his diamond strength. LHO made a Michaels cuebid, something that seems to occur far more often in robot play than when playing against humans. Partner in the North seat, made a 3♣ bid—described as a competitive raise with 4+♣, 7-9 total points. East then bid 4♥ and Usla did what, vulnerable against nonvulnerable?

He bid 5♣!?!. Even vulnerable v. non-vulnerable, Usla judged that one of the principles of robot play needed to be honored. That principle: Whenever at all reasonable (or even slightly unreasonable) don't let the opponents play. That principle doesn't work all the time, but I've found it works in the vast majority of cases, particularly when non-vulnerable, but was also true here, even when vulnerable. Robots generally don't like to double.

The full deal:

Usla went down four, but still did better than allowing 4♥ to play. He was a bit hoisted on his own petard, however, for bidding 1♣ instead of 1♦ and ending up in 5♣ instead of 5♦. Those who bid

5♦ went down only three. They scored 79.17%. Usla, nonetheless, scored 58.33%, while those who allowed their bot opponents to play 4♥ scored 45.83% for holding them to 4♥, and only 16.67% for allowing them to make 5♥. Lesson learned and relearned—don't let your opponents play the hand when you can avoid it.

Board 6

On Board 6, Usla was up to his usual tactics. Non-vulnerable v. vulnerable, in second seat after a pass, he held ♠AKQ952 ♥K52 ♦A7 ♣74.

What did he open?

Did you have any doubt? 1♠, of course. Now, he heard a 2NT response from his partner, showing a balanced invite, 11-12HCP, no four-card major and partial stops in the unbid suits. Without the fear of a ♣ lead, Usla could now readily bid 3NT, which he did, practically assured of six spade tricks.

The full deal:

Usla has an easy path to taking 11 tricks; the same 11 tricks that those in 4♠ are mostly making. Less than 20% of the field was in 3NT so Usla received 80%, while those in a pedestrian 4♠ making five received 42.50%. Is there much risk to what Usla did? I'm not sure. I suppose, if partner bid 1♦ or 1♥, he could bid 1♠ and see what partner bid next, always with 3NT in mind.

Board 7

On Board 7, Usla found himself with this modest collection: ♠AJ8 ♥J743 ♦AJ85 ♣K2.

As dealer, both vulnerable, what did he open?

He had 14HCP, so 1NT it is, I would think. No. I'm wrong again. 1♣ was Usla's gambit here. Why? Again, a deterrence bid that takes advantage of the robots' mechanical tendencies, so they don't lead a club and later respect his club holding. He saw 1♥ from his partner and now what? Surely 2♥. Wrong again. He bid 3NT!?!. Why? Again, I'm not sure. There's clearly method here, but I just haven't figured it out. That's why he's a King on BBO and I'm far, far from it. The opponents were silent throughout, so that was encouraging, and bidding 3NT protected the ♣K. But still?

The full deal:

	N	North	W	N	E	S
7		♠ 652				1♣
D		♥ AKQ6	P	1♥	P	3NT
		♦ Q972	P	P	P	
		♣ J8				

W	West			E	East
	♠ K1094				♠ Q73
	♥ 1098				♥ 52
	♦ 4				♦ K1063
	♣ A9765				♣ Q1043

	S	South		
		♠ AJ8		
		♥ J743		
		♦ AJ85		
		♣ K2	3NT S	NS: 0 EW: 0

I'm not alone in my bewilderment. Usla was the only one of 25 persons who played this hand in NT. After a ♥ lead, he made 5NT for +660 and 100% (making 4NT would have yielded the same result). Everyone else was in some number of hearts, usually 4♥, going down one or two. After Usla received the ♥ lead, he played the diamonds for no losers by leading the ♦Q and then fortuitously got three spade tricks when the robot opponents discarded badly and tried to avoid an endplay. Most in hearts lost two spades, a diamond and one or two clubs.
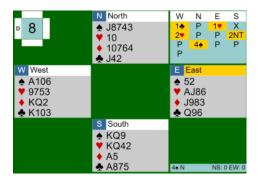

Board 8

Board 8 brought a variety of results. In fourth seat, Usla held ♠KQ9 ♥KQ42 ♦A5 ♣A875. The bidding had proceeded 1♣-P-1♥.

What did he bid?

The vast majority passed; a few bid 1NT. Usla joined two others and doubled. LHO bid 2♥, followed by two passes, back to Usla. The choices were pass, double or what Usla alone chose—2NT. 2NT revealed to his robot partner an invitation to 3NT, 4+♠, a stopper in hearts and clubs and 24 HCP. Double would have revealed 4+♠, 4+♦ and 16+ total points. Usla had to know his partner was near broke, and he also had to know what he'd shown the robot. A bit perplexing, particularly when he told us that robots don't like aggressive bids. Here, he got burned, but only a bit. His robot partner bid 4♠ after the double. This hand was played in four different contracts: 4♠ (2), 3♠ (2), 2♥ (12), and 2♥x (1).

The full deal:

	N	North	W	N	E	S
D **8**		♠ J8743	1♣	P	1♥	X
		♥ 10	2♥	P	P	2NT
		♦ 10764	P	4♠	P	P
		♣ J42	P			

W	West			E	East
	♠ A106				♠ 52
	♥ 9753				♥ AJ86
	♦ KQ2				♦ J983
	♣ K103				♣ Q96

	S	South		
		♠ KQ9		
		♥ KQ42		
		♦ A5		
		♣ A875	4♠ N	NS: 0 EW: 0

There are several noteworthy items about the results here. Those who allowed the robots to win the contract again usually fared poorly. The nine pairs who let the opponents play in 2♥, making, for -110, received 37.5%. One pair somehow allowed 2♥ to make six for a cold bottom and 0%. 2♥ went down one doubled for 100%, and went down one undoubled for 90.63%. Meanwhile Usla, as usual, played his cards one better than the field and went down only two in 4♠ (the two pairs in 3♠ went down two as well, while the other person in 4♠ went down three for a near bottom). So Usla managed to score 75% for -100, beating the nine pairs that let 2♥ make for -110 and the one pair that allowed it to make six for -230.

So, what have we learned from Usla? Clearly, make every effort to avoid letting the opponents play the contract and also make every effort to play the contract in 3NT. NT is hard to defend against and Bob Hamman's rule applies in robot play even more so than in human play—namely, when 3NT is at all a reasonable option, bid it.

There's clearly method to what Usla does in both the bidding and play. Cracking the code remains elusive, at least for me. However, it seems that pursuit of that code continues to be a worthwhile endeavor if one wants to improve one's play with robots. No doubt, you'll see more of Usla in the future as I follow him and try to learn from his exploits.

See you next week. Stay safe and healthy.