Playing with Robots
Part XLI
By pluckycat

In my constant search to improve, as regular readers of these articles will attest, I often look to the experts who consistently score spectacularly when playing with robots. I review their games and see what we can learn. This week, I return to leftfoot, who scored 79.18% this Tuesday in a 12-board daylong ACBL masterpoint tournament to come in first among 1428 players. We've seen leftfoot's bidding and play before. (See Playing with Robots - Part 28.) There are usually many lessons to be gleaned from a review of the boards leftfoot plays. These are no exception. I will focus only on seven of them. Three this week and four next week. They represent six successes and one uncharacteristic misstep. You'll see leftfoot's hands first to see if you can match his bidding prowess against robots and then see if you can match his playing prowess against robots.

On Board 1, both sides nonvulnerable, after two passes, leftfoot picked up ♠AQ984 ♥107 ♦K84 ♣KQ7. What would you bid?

Regular readers will have no trouble with this. In robot play, all somewhat balanced, 14HCP hands are opened 1NT. I've yet to find one that isn't by leftfoot. A five-card major or small doubleton is no deterrent. Indeed, the question is, what distribution *disqualifies* a 14HCP hand from being opened 1NT? The presence of a singleton certainly doesn't.

leftfoot's bot partner raised to 3NT with ♠1032 ♥K3 ♦Q97♣AJ1042. He received a low club lead. Plan the play.

Suffice it to say, leftfoot won 11 tricks, tying for top with one other player and receiving 99.36%. Most of the 77 players competing against leftfoot in this cohort played in four spades making four or five. leftfoot won the opening lead in dummy, immediately led the ♠10, covered by the ♠J (as robots almost always do) and ♠Q. He took five club tricks, finessed again in spades to take five spade tricks and a diamond at the end.

The full deal:

On Board 3, leftfoot picked up ♠Q ♥AQJ83 ♦KJ643 ♣A3. What did he open in first seat, not vulnerable versus vulnerable? Well, you guessed it. He opened 2NT, of course. leftfoot constantly upgrades hands to bid NT. How much of an upgrade a hand will receive appears to be a matter of judgment, but 17- and 18-point hands appear to be routinely opened 2NT. This time, he ended up in 3NT when his bot partner put him there with 6 HCP. But it's not a bad contract by any means.

The full deal:

N North	W N E S
♠ J9642	2NT
♥ 5	P 3♥ P 3♠
♦ AQ7	P 3NT P P
♣ J862	P

W West		E East
♠ A53		♠ K1087
♥ K10962		♥ 74
♦ 109		♦ 852
♣ K104		♣ Q975

S South	
♠ Q	
♥ AQJ83	
♦ KJ643	
♣ A3	3NT S NS: 0 EW: 0

leftfoot received the ♦10 lead, the typical neutral lead that robots make. Plan the play, focusing on just the North-South hands.

Here, I think leftfoot made one of his rare mistakes. He didn't give the bot defenders a chance to go wrong and assumed that hearts would behave. leftfoot won the diamond lead in dummy and led his singleton heart, inserted the ♥Q, which lost to the ♥K. Back came the ♥10, taken by the ♥J. Now came the mistake: He cashed the ♥A to receive the bad news of the 5-2 heart split. Thereafter, leftfoot cashed his five diamonds, two hearts and a club, but West couldn't be endplayed and leftfoot had to lose five tricks. Going down one was worth only 8.46%. Seven of the 78 in the cohort made 3NT. They scored 95.38%. Had leftfoot made 3NT, his overall score for the 12 boards would have been well above the 80 percentile range. Those who made 3NT played the hand exactly as leftfoot did up to the heart finesse. But after the finesse lost and the ♥10 came back, they didn't cash the ♥A. Rather, these successful declarers ran the five diamonds and, on the run of the diamonds, the West robot discarded a heart.

The discard of the heart allowed those declarers to take four heart tricks by giving up a heart while they still retained the ♣A as an entry to the hearts. I've preached here often that, when possible, you should try to give the robots a chance to make a mistake. Here, perhaps too confident of a 4-3 heart break, leftfoot didn't give the robots such a chance. He paid the price. If you bid to contracts few others will reach, you need to make them to achieve a good score. leftfoot, who's constantly reaching contracts that others do not, needs to back up his bidding with his play, which most often he does.

On Board 7, both sides vulnerable, in first seat leftfoot was dealt ♠102 ♥ AKQJ104 ♦ 432♣84. What did he open? Again, good for you, you guessed it, didn't you? Of course, it's obvious; he opened 1NT. "Crazy," you say. Well, step back for a minute. This is a best-hand tournament, which means no one can have a better hand than leftfoot on this deal. Thus, it's certain that the high-card points are evenly divided among the four hands. leftfoot does have six running tricks and, with its ten points, surely his robot can be counted on to provide at least one 1 or 2 more.

His bot partner bid 3♥, which is a splinter showing 1-♥ 4♠, 4-5♦, 4-5♣ and 12+ total points. leftfoot had no choice but to bid 3NT. "Hoist on his own petard," you say smugly. Not so fast.

The full deal:

He received the ♥9 lead. Look, for the moment, only at the North-South hands and plan the play.

leftfoot won the trick with the ♥A and played a low diamond to the ♦J, losing to the ♦Q. The East robot, not surprisingly, led back a heart—never in a million years would his programmed self suspect the hand leftfoot had. So leftfoot played another diamond, this time captured by West with the ♦A. West now, not surprisingly, led the ♣10, covered by the ♣J and taken by the ♣A in East. Now East, still having no clue as to leftfoot's heart holding, led back another heart. Curtains for the defense. leftfoot now had six hearts, two diamonds and a club. He took 9 tricks and received a well-deserved 100%.

This was my favorite board of the 12, by far. It brings into play leftfoot's ability to take advantage of the best-hand nature of a robot tournament and how hiding the nature of one's hand steers the robot defenders in the wrong direction; here to persist with hearts, particularly after North's splinter bid. leftfoot, according to his bidding, should have four hearts at most, so no wonder East persisted with hearts on defense. Almost everyone else was in some number of hearts, usually two. Those making 2♥ received slightly above 50% because a few ventured higher and went down.

 I have now seen ample evidence of how well leftfoot does with his tactics. The question remains for me, "Why can't I bring myself to do what he does when playing with and against robots?" In the near future, I hope to report on just such an effort and its results. I will try to ask, "What would leftfoot do here?" In the meantime, next week, we will analyze four more of his hands from this tournament.

Stay safe and healthy.