

Rick's Tricks

STAYING AHEAD OF THE PACK

By Rick Roeder

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The 2021 ACBL Spring Robot Individual attracted a field of over 3,000. At \$50 a pop, some businesses fared quite well during the Pandemic! I was very enthused going into the third and final day. I was sitting 11th overall. I figured I needed at least 70% to have any shot of winning.

I had one very poor board during the final day (*I had meant to open 1 No Trump but my spastic fingers clicked on 2 No Trump. Worse, I did not have my "Confirm" settings on. MAJOR OOPS!*).

A subsequent hand sealed my doom:

I held:

♠KJ54 ♥A4 ♦AK2 ♣KQ52

Playing for tops, I downgraded my 20 HCP due to lack of any intermediates and opened 1♣. My Robot partner bid 1♥. I rebid 2 No Trump and the Robot kicked the extra point.

The Robot leads against 3 No Trump are extremely passive. The Robots bow down to the gospel of David Bird with zealotry unsurpassed by many fervent religious devotees. Upon receiving the ♦8 lead, I perused the dummy:

♠A7 ♥Q762 ♦J9763 ♣83

When I inserted dummy's 9, to my considerable surprise, the 9 proved supreme! Say what?!?! I cashed my 2 high Diamonds, noting that LHO started with ♦Q108, as Righty pitched a Club. Had the Robots blown a gasket? Were they **finally** rebelling against Bird and his acolytes? Decide how you would proceed before reading on.

I opted for a risky play of a low Heart at trick 4 and was quite gratified that the Queen was winner #4. Gosh, this hand was going well! I cashed my remaining 2 diamond winners. The rest of us discarded 1 club and 1 spade. At tricks 5 and 6, RHO discarded a Spade and another club. I noted that RHO's Spade pitch came at trick 5, Lefty's Spade pitch was at trick 6.

At trick 7, I lead a Club to my King which was gobbled up by Lefty's Ace. The ♣Jack return was won by my Queen, as RHO made another Spade pitch. My eighth trick came by cashing the ♥A. I travelled to the ♠A and played another Spade. On these two Spades, RHO had followed with the 9 and the 10. I knew Lefty had the ♥K and the ♣10 left, leaving LHO Robot with **at most** one spade remaining. Who had the Dame? My decision to finesse the Jack was idiotic, easily one of the more foolish plays in a lifetime of some amazingly foolish gaffes. LHO took the ♠Q and had the balance. Making 3 for a 40% score.

First, the Robot almost certainly would have found a Spade lead lacking the Queen, given that they had honors in the other 3 suits. So, my play was foolish in that regard. However, in the “real realm” of bridge, my finesse was also a big, big goof! The combination of a favorable Diamond lead and my risky, but profitable, Heart play at trick 4 had put me well ahead of the field. Making 4 would have been a fine score, regardless as to the location of the ♠Q. Making 5, due to a pseudo triple squeeze on my LHO, would have been a delicious maraschino cherry on an already yummy sundae.

I can handle making a bridge mistake –once. Live and learn! To make the same bridge mistake twice monumentally infuriates me and is quite painful. This transgression brought back to memory one of the most gutwrenching hands of my bridge career. I narrowly lost a national championship due to one hand where I did not appreciate that I was the “*Leader of the Pack*”. I was declaring 4 Hearts and received a favorable lead that I thought would not be made at other tables. I had to decide how to play a trump suit with AJx in dummy opposite my K109xx. Given the helpful and somewhat weird opening lead, I thought the opening leader was likely to hold the Queen of trump. So, instead of making the “book” play of the Ace and running the Jack, I went the other way. **OOPS!** I squandered my equity and wound up with an average board.

Masochistically, after my Robot travesty in 3 No Trump, I also had to revisit this nightmare from 7 years ago. In the classic Shangri-Las’ smash, the Leader of the Pack also met a fatal ending. Worse, two songs, Andy Williams’ “*A Fool Never Learns*” and Sanford Clark’s “*The Fool*” keep playing in my mind over the past 24 hours. If those songs do not soon stop, I regret to say that I will soon resort to copious amounts of alcohol. ♣