

Those *&*^%*#@ Computer Hands!

On March 26th, Laurel and I played in the Charity game at New Bern, which featured pre-dealt hands from 1985 and an analysis sheet. We also got to be the “bump” pair in an odd movement for 7 ½ tables. We sat out 2 boards, bumped 2 N/S for 2, then 4 N/S for 2—and then the E/W pair at table 4 for the next 2 boards! With 28 boards in play, everyone played 26, and as pair 15, we got to play all but one of the other pairs.

While I did OK on some boards, I failed to get in tune with 4-5 others, and we didn’t have the greatest of games (52%). I’d like to blame the movement, saying we missed out on too many good hands with all of that switching around, but it was more the boards themselves. I just didn’t find the right bids or plays at times, and it was partly because the hands started off being so strange that I fell into that “blame the computer” mode and began expecting bad karma when I’d have been better off just doing the routine thing.

The ACBL has always insisted that computer-dealt hands are no stranger than human-dealt ones, and we have certainly had plenty of oddly distributed hands at our club over the last few months. What bothered me about some of these hands is that they seemed designed to be tricky. Of the 32 hands in the set, ¼ included at least one hand with a void. That seems a bit out of the ordinary. Eleven hands featured “mirror” singletons—hands where, if there is one singleton, another player is singleton in a different suit (some of these overlapped the “void” hands). There were three hands with 7-card suits, one 8-card suit, and five that featured at least one hand with 6-5 or better.

I’d like to share two hands with you, one that we played and one that we defended. I’ll give “your” hand and some or all of the bidding, and then give the rest of the hands on the next page.

Hand 1
 Dealer: West
 Vul: N/S
 Your hand (East)
 ♠ 9
 ♥ AKQ109532
 ♦ ---
 ♣ 9872

Hand 2
 Dealer: North
 Vul: N/S
 Your hand (West)
 ♠ AKQ9752
 ♥ ---
 ♦ QJ98
 ♣ J6

West	North	East	South	North	East	South	West
1NT (15-17)	2♦*	?		Pass	1♣	Pass	1♠
				Pass	2♥**	Pass	?

* Alerted as diamonds and a higher-ranking suit.

** On hand 2 if you ask for aces and kings, East will show 3 aces and 2 kings.

Do you bid scientifically? How? Would you have bid just 1♠ on hand 2? How high is up? Decide before proceeding to the next page.

Both hands illustrate the difficulty of bidding with a void opposite a partner with lots of points (East's reverse on hand 2 should promise 16 or 17 to 19 HCP). Regular Blackwood or Gerber should not be used by a hand with a void. How do you know which ace you are missing if you don't hold them all? Cue bidding will work, and so will Exclusion Blackwood—but most of us don't play this convention (see the explanation at the end).

On hand 1, we were fortunate that Laurel held the East hand instead of me. I'd have killed myself trying to be scientific; she just bid what her card sense told her should make, leaping directly to 6 hearts. Then she solved the play problem as well, getting us 4.5 on a 6 top (2 pairs didn't bid the slam and 1 went down).

My hand:	Laurel's hand
♠ A63	♠ 9
♥ J6	♥ AKQ109532
♦ KQ72	♦ ---
♣ KQ105	♣ 9872

The opening lead was the J♦. The K♦ was played, the ace from North, and Laurel ruffed. After drawing trumps, she led a club to the king. North took his ace (later, he said what the analysis sheet did, that ducking might have caused a problem). He led back spade taken by dummy's ace, Laurel pitched a club on the Q♦ to muddy the waters and ruffed a diamond back to her hand. The moment of truth—do you finesse the 10♣? North had 1 heart, and his bid promised 9-10 cards in spades and diamonds. If anyone held 3-4 clubs, it had to be South. Laurel finessed, it won, and that was that.

We defended hand 2 against John and Tudi, who play in our Monday morning game. John made a great play on the opening lead that was not rewarded because of the tricky distribution. The complete bidding went something like this (I was "out to lunch" for a while and don't recall it exactly):

North	East (Tudi)	South	West (John)
Pass	1♣	Pass	1♠
Pass	2♥	Pass	3♦ (4 th suit forcing?)
Pass	3NT	Pass	4♣ (Gerber)
Pass	4NT (3 aces)	Pass	5♣ (Gerber)
Pass	5♠ (2 kings)	Pass	7♠

John's hand:	Tudi's hand:
♠ AKQ9752	♠ 10
♥ ---	♥ AKQ7
♦ QJ98	♦ A107
♣ J6	♣ AK1054

The opening lead was a heart. The only problem that might occur is in trumps. On the opening lead John saw that and made a play that would give him an extra chance. Any guesses? He played low and trumped, giving himself the opportunity of trying a trump coup if it became necessary—and it did. Here's where I found the computer to be a bit perverse. John needed 3 entries to dummy to bring off the coup, and he needed the diamond king onside. Well, not only

did I (South) have J864 of trumps, but I also had a singleton club *and* the king of diamonds. By trying for the grand slam and then using the only possible line of play to make it, John was punished with a near bottom score, even though the analysis sheet described as “timid” those who settled for a small slam. To make the hand when the trumps didn’t split, John cashed the ace and king of spades, led a club to the board, pitched a club (not the best play if the coup was going to work), and trumped another heart. He then led the diamond queen, and I won my king then and a trump later on for down 2. Two other pairs bid a grand slam and went down, 1 and 3 tricks respectively. (Don’t ask about the down three—I have no idea where the third under trick would come from). Four pairs bid the small slam, 1 of them in no trump, and made their contracts. One scored 1010, and I think that South might have discussed not leading singleton trumps with his partner!

For those interested in the complete line of play for the trump coup, it would go like this, assuming South held 4 trumps, at least 2 clubs and at least 3 diamonds—but not the king. The opening heart lead is ruffed, AK of trump played, and seeing the split, club to the ace, ruff the ace of hearts (show off!), club to the king, heart ruff (now both declarer and South hold 2 trumps, the “key to the coup” so to speak), Q♦ finessed (it matters not if North covers the queen, the jack or the 9, as long as West unblocks the QJ on the first 2 leads. Declarer is left with Q9 of trump and the ♦8 and is in the dummy. The board has ♥Q and ♣105. South has the J8 of trump and one side suit card (it doesn’t matter what it is) and North is now irrelevant. Declarer plays his good heart. If South doesn’t trump, declarer pitches his last diamond and then leads a club. No matter which card South plays, declarer has the rest. If South trumps the heart, declarer over ruffs, draws the last trump and cashes his good diamond. None of this would work without seeing the need to ruff the opening heart lead (Do you see why?), so well done to John even if it didn’t pan out in the end.

Exclusion Blackwood could have been used in both of these hands, though it would not have helped with the trump situation in hand 2. This convention requires a leap to the five level in the void suit. It asks partner how many aces (or key cards if you play that version of Blackwood) he holds outside of the suit bid at the five level. In hand one, East would jump to 5♦, West would bid 5♠ (one), and the contract would still be 6♥. In hand 2, over 3NT by East, West would bid 5♥ and East would bid 6♣ (2 aces outside of hearts). Experienced Keycard bidders could ask about the K♦ and maybe stop short of the grand slam, but this is pretty complex stuff for most people to remember. Intuition triumphs, right?

May your bridge hands be both weird and rewarding!