

Eliminate Half Tables From Your Games

How to use BBO Robots as your fill-in pair

Introduction

Recently, at the Bridge Club of Center City in Philadelphia, we got tired of the grumbling about half tables. A smaller club like ours regularly hosts games that play four or five boards per round. Too long for a sitout; only 20 boards for the session for half of the field; and way too long to add an extra round at the end with our members busy schedules. We require reservations, but can't turn a pair away without facing the ire of the community. Standby players are more often busy and unavailable than eager and ready on short notice. So we decided to invite the BBO robots to join game. We use The Common Game (TCG) and Jay Whipple joined our effort with valuable ideas and technical support which included testing at the much larger Boca Grande Duplicate Bridge Club in Florida. We put two laptops/tablets on the sitout table, loaded the game hands into BBO, and had the human pair with a sitout play the appropriate hands against the robots with the Director keeping score on the Bridgemates.

This platform worked amazingly well. Many players were already tuned in to online bridge or touchscreen technology; those unfamiliar players accepted the challenge with grace and determination. We always allow the option of taking No Plays instead of facing the robots, but encourage everyone to embrace the experience in a safe, friendly environment. From the first try, we finished all rounds with the robots. Sometimes the robots would scratch, but we solved that problem by making them "not eligible."

In summary, here is how it works.

1. Load the hand records for the hands being played into BBO.
2. Set up a Teaching Table on BBO with the Director as host and two club ids as the East and West players.
3. Load the hands for the game to the teaching table.
4. Human players sit EW and play the robots in normal BBO style.
5. Hand results are entered in the Bridgemates, other scoring devices, or travelers just as at any other table.

Our players loved having no sitouts and being able to enjoy a full session. Let's look at the details of how this solution works.

Procedure

What you need. The only additional equipment you need are inexpensive laptops or tablets that will be used by the two humans at the sitout table. In our case, players donated tablets that were no longer being used. The Director's PC works as the host computer for the BBO session. You do need a good wireless wifi connection.

Three BBO logon IDs are needed -- they are free -- one for the host (which could be his or her regular BBO ID) and one for each of the two human players. We suggest you create two IDs named myclubEAST and myclubWEST. Every player at the sitout table will use the same IDs.

Set-up Steps - Here is a summary of the set-up. Details of each step follow on separate pages.

- 1. Setup the game in ACBLscore or other scoring program.** Setup the game file as you normally would. Be sure to give the robots names and enter them as regular players, but mark them as NE (not eligible). Be sure to start the robot names with the three letters "BBO" as that is how TCG identifies where the robots are sitting which helps in making the process run smoother. After the letters BBO, you can have anything you want, like BBO-R2D2, BBO-C3P0.
- 2. Convert your hand record file to LIN format.** No matter what format your hand record file is in (PBN, DUP, BRI, etc), it needs to be converted to LIN format for BBO. Many hand generation programs will output the format you need. If you use The Common Game, an enhanced LIN file will be provided to you. Details of converting PBN to LIN and using The Common Game are in the section below.
- 3. Upload the LIN file to BBO.** Every BBO account has the feature of letting the user store hand record files in his own MY BBO folder. Easy. Details below.
- 4. Start your playing table.** If you are familiar with BBO, you already know how to start a playing or practice table. For our purposes, you need to start a Teaching Table since that is the table type that allows you to use pre-dealt hands. Complete details are also listed below.
- 5. Move your stored game hands to the Teaching Table.** From the BBO playing table, you need to display the hands to be played. You can use the Deal Source option from the Teaching Table or pick the hands one at a time from your uploaded list. Details below.
- 6. Play the hands.** When a hand is displayed on the tablets, it is ready to be played by the two sitout humans and the two robots. Play is in normal BBO style.

7. **Scoring.** At the end of the hand, the correct score will be displayed on BBO but the input of the result is independent of BBO. The players (or director) need to enter the result into the Bridgemates or other scoring method just as they would at a regular table.

That's it! You are using robots to fill in for your half table. BBO is a very intuitive and robust system, so don't worry, you cannot mess anything up. After you go through the procedure a couple of times it will seem second nature. If you have any questions, contact Mike Giesler at mikegiesler@gmail.com, or David Rose at david@bridgeclubofcentercity.com. For help setting up the enhanced LIN file for half tables with TCG contact sara@thecommongame.com. In addition, remember BBO is free and they will waive the cost of robots for the host ID for any club using this platform. Details follow.

Set-up Details

1. Setup the game in ACBLscore or other scoring program

Set-up the game in ACBLscore as you normally would. List your robots as players and give them any names you want. We used BBO-R2D2 and BBO- C3P0, but use any names you choose as long as they start with "BBO." It is a good idea to let the robots sit north-south so you do not have to move the computers. There is no reason, however, that you could not switch the directions. If you run a Howell and the robots are not stationary, you will have to do some switching. Be sure to mark the robots as NE (not eligible). In ACBLscore, press F9.

2. Convert your hand record file to LIN Format

BBO uses the LIN format for their hand records. Your hand-generating program may be able to output the LIN file directly. If not, you have to convert to LIN. If you use The Common Game, it is easy and the provided LIN file will have some enhancements to the file to make the playing easier. The Common Game will also provide the same service for non-Common Game PBN files as described below.

Method One (The Common Game) - If you use TCG, it already knows the PBN hand record file for the game you are running. A special Common Game Dropbox folder called *sitouts* has been set up for creating the required LIN file. Before you have done any scoring, move your new ACBLscore game file to this folder. Do this by pressing CTRL-B in ACBLscore and backing up the game file to the special folder. When you activate the

“backup” of your game file to the Dropbox folder, the required LIN file will appear in that folder ready to be moved to BBO.

There is an advantage to sending your game file early to The Common Game as it will note the number of tables, your board movement, and position of the robots. Besides returning the required hand record file in LIN format, it will also sequence the boards in the order needed for the sitout table (in case they are not played in order Board 1 through N). This simply makes managing the sitout table boards easier. In addition, for safety and security reasons, a null separator board will be inserted before the first board of each round. This board will show 13 spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs in each hand so that when the players see it, they will recognize that the round is over or a new round is about to begin.

Method Two (any PBN file) - If you don't use The Common Game, you can still use the TCG LIN file conversion service to convert you own PBN file to the enhanced LIN file. Just place you own hand record file in their private Dropbox/Sitouts folder in addition to the ACBLscore Game File. This hand record file must be PBN and have the date in the name of the file using the format YYMMDD. (e.g. 170116MyClubHandRecord.pbn). Contact Sara at TCG for details on setting up the Sitouts folder.

The enhanced LIN file produced by TCG is very helpful and we recommend using it. However, BBO will accept any LIN file. If your dealing program generates one, that is fine. Also, you can also convert any PBN file to a regular LIN file using this simple website: <http://johnfromarran.org.uk/Bridge/PbnToLin.html>.

Just browse to the path and folder of your PBN file and the website will return the LIN version of your file to the same folder. (Note that with this method you do not have to prepare your ACBLscore game file ahead of time, but you do not get the boards re-sequenced or separator boards inserted.) You are now ready to upload to BBO.

3. Upload the LIN file to BBO

The Director/Host has his own BBO account where he can move pre-dealt hands saved on his computer to BBO. This is a built-in feature of BBO.

1. Log On to BBO.
2. Click on *My BBO* in the top option bar.
3. Pick *Hands and Results* from the drop-down menu and a new window will pop up.
4. Click on *Create new folder*.
5. Name the folder whatever you want, but we recommend you use the current date.
6. Again, click on *Create new folder* with your new name inserted in the box.
7. Click on *Import LIN file*.

8. Scroll to your new folder name and click on *SELECT*.
9. This will show a window where you can browse to the LIN file on your computer.
10. Once you have browsed to the correct LIN file, click on *Import*.
11. You should get a message that says your hand records have been successfully uploaded.
12. Close the *Import* window.
13. Now from the list of folder names, you can select the folder you want and click *SHOW*.
This will present a list of all the hands that can be selected one at a time to be played on your sitout table. Just let this list sit for now while you set up your playing table. You will come back to it later.

4. Start your playing table

BBO has many types of tables but you want to use a "Teaching Table" -- the only table type that can use pre-dealt hands.

1. Make sure that your east and west BBO IDs are logged on to your tablets.
2. From the BBO main page, select PRACTICE from the Play or Watch Bridge column on the left.
3. Select START A TEACHING TABLE.
4. Fill in the names of your east and west BBO IDs in the appropriate reserved seats for the table. Just leave the north and south boxes blank. Other options do not need to be changed.
5. Click START TABLE.
6. After the table come up, click on the word ROBOT in the north and south positions to launch the robots ready for play.
7. Note that when you start your table, invitations will be sent to the tablets on the sitout table that need to be accepted to join the table.

5. Move your stored hands to the Teaching Table and select the boards to be played

There are two methods of selecting boards. You should try both to see which one works best for you. One method moves the boards in the sequence they were received from the LIN file each time the Director (also the table Host) presses REDEAL. The other method allows the Director to select any board he wants to be played at the table. The methods can be used at the same time and the Director can easily switch back and forth.

Play in sequence - This method will work fine, especially if you sit the robots as NS at table so they will play the boards in order starting with board 1. After your table is launched and you have clicked on ROBOT for north and south, then

1. Click on DEAL SOURCE on the option bar at the bottom of the table.
2. Click on USE SAVED DEALS.
3. Select the appropriate folder from the list.
4. Click SELECT and then CLOSE.

Now, whenever you click on the REDEAL button on the bottom bar, the next deal will be loaded to the table ready to be played. When the players finish a board, the Director can click on REDEAL for the next board. But be careful. You cannot go backwards if you accidentally click on REDEAL twice or if you want to play an earlier board. It is fairly easy to reload the entire set from DEAL SOURCE but you don't want to do that too often. Be careful not to press REDEAL after the end of a round as the next active board will be displayed and you do not want other players to see it. This method shows an advantage of using The Common Game file as it provides separator boards between rounds. If you need to play a specific board number, you can always divert to the second method of selecting any specific board from the list.

Selecting a specific board - Remember the listing of uploaded boards you had when you first did the LIN file upload? This is what you use to select a specific board. You may still have it up or it is easy to relaunch:

1. Click on *My BBO* from the top option bar.
2. Click on *Hands and Results*.
3. Find your folder in the list and click on SHOW. You will see a list of all the hands in your folder.
4. Find the board you want and click on SHOW for that board. The actual board will be displayed, but only the Director can see it.
5. At the bottom of the displayed hand there is an EXPORT DEAL button. Press it.
6. You will see an option that says UPLOAD DEAL TO TABLE. Press it. That board will be automatically loaded to your sitout table for the players to play.
7. When the players need another board, you can select it from the list the same way.

You can go back and forth from selecting a specific board to just using the REDEAL button to advance to the next board. Note, however, that when you select a specific board to be played and then press the REDEAL button, the next board displayed does not start from the specific board number. The REDEAL goes back to the position it was in when playing the boards sequentially.

6. Playing, Scoring, and Tips

Bidding and play proceeds at the sitout table in normal BBO style. Scoring the result of each board for your club game is independent of BBO. BBO displays the result, but players enter the result of each board directly into the Bridgmate or other scoring method just as at a regular table. The Director can see the BBO result and may choose enter results himself since the players may be occupied using their tablets. In any case, since he sees the result he can check to make sure the BBO result is the same as the result entered in the Bridgmate (remember there are no live opponents at the table to confirm scores). In addition, there is a complete record of the play of the hand so if you want to record the opening lead, it is easy to find.

Tips and Suggestions - As we said, BBO is a wonderful system that will do a lot for you. If you make a mistake, you can always go back or restart if needed. Here are a few items to think about.

1. Security should not be a problem. Make sure that players away from the sitout table cannot see the hands on the tablets. Do not advance to the next hand too quickly at the end of the round so the departing players can see the next board. Maintaining security is a lot easier when there is a separator board between rounds.
2. BBO has a tab called *My Results* that shows results from previous hands. Be sure you do not have it on at your sitout table.
3. The robots are good players, so be sure to list them as NE (not eligible) otherwise they might take masterpoints from the human players.
4. The robots play a very standard 2/1 system. Their convention card can be printed out and left on the sitout table.
5. Remember BBO will waive the cost of robots for the Host ID at any club using this method. Contact Diana directly at BBO at dianaeveline@bridgebase.com.
6. Can players “game” the robots by psyching or making unusual bids? The robots might not understand, but neither will partner. Moreover, the robots might not understand special bids or conventions players have, but they play well and won’t have any major problems. Finally, the Director can see all of the bids and should put a stop to deliberate gaming to beat the system.
7. The system was written for one sitout pair. However, it could be extend to a case where you have only one robot or three robots playing at a table when you have an odd number of players and want to fill out full tables for your game.
8. Anyone who wants to see or replay a board as a learning exercise at the end of a session can easily do so from the sitout table. Just reload the board of interest. Directors or teachers could even project hands to a big screen as a teaching tool.

Mike Giesler, Philadelphia PA