



Lead an Ace vs a Suit Slam

by Andrew Robson

ZIA Mahmood calls this ‘Ross’s Rule’, after California’s Hugh Ross, a match-point specialist. At teams and/or rubber you have to consider very carefully whether as a defender to lead an unsupported ace vs a suit slam; you may set up declarer’s king and lose a second trick in the suit. Arguably leading an unsupported ace makes declarer slightly more likely to make his slam.

At pairs, however, it is normally fairly clear to lead an ace vs a suit slam, for one simple reason: you will not go to bed with it and let the opponents make an overtrick. At pairs, letting them make an overtrick can be extremely costly.

Take this four-table duplicate, with your opponents having a slam:

West	North	East	South
			1♠
Pass	4♠	Pass	6♠
All Pass			

Lead your ♦A and you’ll make it. Declarer will wrap up the remaining twelve tricks in double-quick time, but at least you get your ace.

Say instead you begin with the ♥J. Declarer wins with the ace, draws trumps and plays out ♣Q-A-K, throwing a diamond from dummy. He ruffs a fourth club, cashes the ♥K, ruffs a third heart, then cashes the established fifth club and discards dummy’s ♦K. He ruffs his singleton diamond in dummy and chalks up the lot. Rats.

★★★★★

Is there ever an occasion at pairs where you should not follow Ross’s Rule? Yes, there is. Say that from your hand (and/or the bidding) you are sure no other pair holding the opponents’ cards will bid slam. You then have just one priority: to beat it. If, by failing to cash your ace, declarer makes an overtrick, then you have only earned yourself the same round zero you would have scored by cashing your ace and restricting declarer to twelve tricks. Because no one else is there.

Your MPs

Table 1	6♠ making 12 tricks	-980	6 MPs
Table 2	6NT making 12 tricks	-990	3 MPs
Table 3	6NT making 12 tricks	-990	3 MPs
Table 4	6♠ making 13 tricks	-1010	0 MPs

The defender who cashed his ace at Table 1, so restricting declarer to twelve tricks in 6♠, scored an absolute top. The player at Table 4, who did not cash his ace vs 6♠ and never made it, scored an absolute bottom.

Game All. Dealer South.

♠ 9 6	♠ Q 10 8 5 4	♠ 2
♥ J 10 5 2	♥ K 9 4 3	♥ Q 8 7
♦ A J 9 4 3	♦ K 7	♦ Q 10 8 6 2
♣ 10 3	♣ Q 4	♣ J 9 7 6
		♠ A K J 7 3
		♥ A 6
		♦ 5
		♣ A K 8 5 2

Game All. Dealer West.

♠ J 4	♠ K 3 2	♠ 7
♥ A J 5	♥ K 8 2	♥ 10 9 7 4 3
♦ K 10 8 7	♦ A J 5 2	♦ 9
♣ K J 8 7	♣ A 6 2	♣ Q 10 9 5 4 3
		♠ A Q 10 9 8 6 5
		♥ Q 6
		♦ Q 6 4 3
		♣ Void

West	North	East	South
1NT	Pass ¹	2♦ ²	4♠ ³
Pass	6♠	All Pass	

¹ A point short of a penalty double.

² Transfer to hearts.

³ Punchy. ♥Q-6 doesn't look great.

West knows that few, if any other, North-Souths will bid to slam with him holding a weak no-trump. He must therefore defeat the slam. If he leads the ♥A, declarer will make his contract. Declarer will win any trick-two play, draw trumps, lead to dummy's ♦J and throw two diamonds on the ♥K (having unblocked the queen) and the ♣A. Twelve tricks.

However, West should break Ross's Rule. Judging that leading the ace of hearts is likely to give declarer two heart tricks and his slam, West leads a super-passive trump.

Declarer can still succeed though – can you see how? He draws a second trump finishing in hand, then leads the ♥6 towards dummy to put West in a fork. Rise with the ace and the play is as though he'd led the ace at trick one – twelve tricks via the marked diamond finesse. So West plays low and the king scores.

Declarer now cashes the ♣A and has a choice of discards. In fact he can succeed whether he throws a diamond or the ♥Q. Say he throws a diamond. He now runs all his trumps to reduce to a four-card ending where he, West and dummy all have a heart and three diamonds. He leads a diamond to the jack, then exits with a heart. West wins with the ace but must lead from his ♦K.

Alternatively, say declarer throws the ♥Q on the ♣A. He runs his trumps and as he leads his penultimate trump, West must reduce to four diamonds and either a club or a heart. Dummy must reduce to four diamonds and a card of the same suit West has retained. South leads a diamond to the jack, ruffs that heart/club, to reduce West to three diamonds, then ducks a diamond. West wins cheaply, but must lead from king-ten, dummy having ace-small and declarer queen-small. Declarer runs the lead to the queen and again chalks up his slam.

Do you think declarer would have made the slam if West keeps hold of his ♥A? No – nor do I – he'd have to read the position absolutely perfectly.

Still, most of the time, remember Hugh Ross – he'll stand you in good stead. □



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