Leads against slams by Sandra Landy

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Bidding to a making slam is not easy even for experienced players. Less experienced players find it difficult and some never even try. But slams are an exciting part of the game both for declarer and defenders and neither side should panic when one comes along. Consider this auction.

South	West	North	East
1NT	pass	4NT	pass
6NT			

1NT shows 12-14 points. In Standard English Acol, a 4NT response to 1NT shows about 20-21 points and asks South to bid a slam holding a maximum 1NT. So with 14 or a good 13 South went to 6NT.

♠ 10 9 8	You are West, it's your lead.
♥ A 8 3 2	Does the bidding give any clues?
♦ 6 4 2	Are leads different against slams?
♣ 10 9 8	What card do you choose?

- The bidding does give you some clues about the North/South hands since North did not jump straight to 6NT.
- North, with 22 or more points, would know that N/S had at least 34 points between the two hands. With 34 or more points, N/S are missing at most two kings (or an ace and a queen). Whilst slam isn't guaranteed it should have a good play.
- 4NT over 1NT did not ask about aces (despite what many players think!). It asked South to bid a slam with a maximum for 1NT, so South has shown 14 or a good 13 points to bid 6NT, with less South would pass 4NT.
- North did not use Stayman or bid a suit on the way to slam, so North has a fairly balanced hand.
- You have 4 points; partner is likely to have just two or possibly three points. You want to make sure your lead doesn't kill the only potential trick in partner's hand.
- Leads to 3NT are hoping to take five tricks. Against 6NT, we are hoping to take TWO tricks. So leads to slams are often different to leads to 3NT.
- We do not need to play our ♥A at trick one. Since both North and South have balanced hands, our heart trick won't disappear.

Against 3NT you would lead the ♥2, fourth highest of your longest suit. You would be hoping to set up length tricks in hearts. But that would be wrong against 6NT, where you only need to make two tricks. Against a slam we often choose a passive lead, one that doesn't give declarer a trick. Let declarer struggle to find 12 tricks.

So what card should you lead from the hand above?

I would choose one of my 10 9 8 holdings. If North has a longer suit it is more likely to be a minor than a major, so I would choose the ♠10. Now look at the complete deal. Cover up the E/W hands and decide how you, as South, would play 6NT on the ♠10 lead. Remember to do a SWOT before you touch a card.

♠ K Q 5	First count your tricks.
♥ J 9 5	4 spades, 4 diamonds, 3 clubs.
♦ A K J 9	Only hearts can provide the twelfth trick.
♣ K Q J	You have to decide where the ♥A is!

♠ A J 7 4	6NT can be made.
♥ K 10 6	South leads the ♥J from dummy.
♦ Q 5 2	If East plays the ♥4, South has a guess
♣ A 5 2	If South plays the ♥K, 6NT goes down.

If West leads the ♥A at trick one, or if West leads the fourth highest ♥2, then South has no guess in hearts and 6NT always makes. Here is the complete deal:

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

QUIZ	**What would you lead?**
1	
♠ 10 9 8	South opens 1NT
♥ J 9 8 3	North bids Stayman
♦ 6 4 2	South says 2♥
♣ A 3 2	North bids 6♥.
2	
♠ 10 9 6 5 3 2	Same auction
♥ A 2	N/S play in 6♥.
♦ 7 5 2	Your lead?
♣ 8 6	
3	
♠ 6 2	South opens 1NT
♥ Q 5 3	North bids 4NT
♦ Q 8 7 4	South bids 6NT
♣ Q J 9 3	Your lead?
4	
♠ 6	Same auction
♥ 10 5 3 2	Your lead to 6NT
♦ 10 8 7 5	
♣ J 10 8 4	

Possible answers

1. Lead the ♣A and hope you have a trump trick to come.
2. Lead a spade. North could have four spades as Stayman was bid. South must have two spades. Maybe you can give partner a ruff when you win the ♥A.
3. Lead the ♠6. You have seven points so partner probably has no points. Don't give a trick on the lead.
4. Anything could be right. But the ♣J, showing the ♣10, will tell partner where your only value is. It may help partner, who has about six points, make discards when declarer cashes winners.