396. Tough start

By Ron Klinger

Dealer West: Both vulnerable

```
West North East South
Pass 1 → (1) Pass 1NT
Pass Pass Pass
(1) 2+ diamonds, playing a strong 1♣ system
```

What would you lead as West from:

J54✓ A965A93263

Opening leads against 1NT are tough when you have no decent suit for your choice. Hoping to hit a long suit with partner is attractive, but here partner, who looks to have about 8-11 points, made no overcall. Of course, partner could have a weak 5-card suit, too poor in high cards for an overcall. Anything could turn out well or poorly on a given day. Noting what the top players do can be a good guide, considering the lead, the defence and declarer's play.

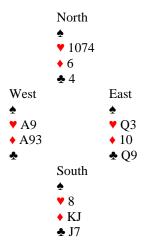
When the deal arose in a quarter-final match in the 2020 Spingold (USA Knock-out Open Teams), both Wests led the ♥5. This was the full deal:

```
North
         ♦ KQ93
         10742
         • 65
         ♣ AK4
West
                  East
♦ J54
                  ♦ A102
♥ A965
                  ♥ QJ3
♦ A932
                   ♦ 1087
                  ♣ Q1098
♣ 63
         South
         ♦ 876
         ♥ K8
         ♦ KOJ4
         ♣ J752
```

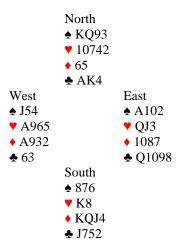
At one table, it began ♥5: two – jack – king. As trick 1 marked West with the ♥9, South returned the ♥8: six – four – queen. East shifted to the ♦8, king, ace and West returned the ♦2: six – ten - queen. After ♠6: four – king – two, declarer played ♣A, ♣K and the ♣4. East won with the ♣Q. East brought back the ♦7 and South made the ♦J and the ♣J, total 7 tricks +90 (a spade, a heart, 2 diamonds and 3 clubs).

At the other table, trick 1 was also \checkmark 5: two – jack – king. Declarer played the \spadesuit 8 to the \spadesuit K, winning, and the \spadesuit 5 to the \spadesuit Q, winning. Next came \spadesuit 7 to the queen, taken by the ace, and East returned the \spadesuit 10, won by West's \spadesuit J.

After ♣6 to the ♣A, declarer cashed the ♠9 and the ♣K. So far declarer had taken 2 spades, 2 clubs, a heart and a diamond. These cards remained:



Declarer played the \bullet 6: ten – king – ace. West shifted to the \blacktriangledown 9. East won with the \blacktriangledown Q and cashed the \clubsuit Q. West won the next heart, but had to give South the seventh trick via the \bullet 9 to the \bullet J for North-South +90 and a flat board.



When the deal was played in a game on BBO, North opened a Standard American 1♣ and South bid 1NT, all pass. Yesterday's question was what West should lead after that auction.

The 1♣: 1NT sequence usually heralds four clubs with responder, but not everyone is orthodox. With 4 diamonds, it is usually best to bid 1♣: 1♦ and let opener, the stronger hand, bid no-trumps first if suitable. Responder might want to grab no-trumps first with holdings which merit protection, for example, K-x or K-J-x or A-Q or similar. On the deal above, South probably chose 1NT to protect the ♥K.

Here West's diamonds also offer a choice. Although East did not bid over 1♣, East might have a weak 5-card suit. As East is more likely to have five weak spades than five weak hearts or five weak diamonds, West began with the ♣4: king – two – seven. East did not have any 5-card suit, but the ♣4 lead fortuitously did not give declarer an extra trick.

After ♦6: seven – king – ace, West returned the ♦2: five – ten – queen. The ♠8 went to the queen and ace and East returned the ♦8: jack – three – ♥4. South exited with the ♠6 to the jack. West cashed the ♦9 and shifted to the ♠6, ace. After taking the ♠9, declarer played the ♠K and the ♠4. East won with the ♠Q and the ♥Q, king, ace and the heart return to the ♥J took 1NT one down, East-West +100. The defence made 2 diamonds, 2 hearts, 2 spades and a club.

There is a significant luck factor in which lead you choose. This time the spade lead proved all right and a low diamond lead is also good for the defence. Next time the low heart lead might be the winner.

Problem for Tomorrow:

Dealer North: Both vulnerable

West North East South
Pass Pass 1

Pass 2

Pa

Playing teams, what would you do as East with:

- **♦** Q843
- **v** 8
- ♦ KQ85
- ♣ Q1072

What about at pairs?

Why not phone or email your bridge partners and compare your answers and your reasoning?

Vodka mixes well with everything but decisions.