

The Pennsylvania Lottery Fraud

It was the greatest lottery swindle in history. And it was so carefully planned and executed that if not for the suspicious behavior of the accomplices, it would never have been discovered. The scandalous revelation made headlines and ended the careers of several men.



Six million residents of Pennsylvania sat glued to their television sets as the winning numbers were drawn for the Daily Numbers Game, Pennsylvania's state lottery.

It was the evening of April 24, 1980, and the lottery was worth \$3.5 million, a record for that lottery. With the stakes so high, far more state residents were watching the drawing than usual. The machine used to draw the numbers stood ready. Inside the machine the numbers sped at incredible speed. Nick Perry, a popular television personality in Pennsylvania, was in charge of the drawing. In his familiar voice, Perry called out cheerfully, "Draw the first number!"

Lottery security officer Edward Plevel pressed a button and the number six shot out. "Six," Plevel announced with a tinge of nervousness in his voice. Tens of thousands of Pennsylvania residents whose first number was not six bade a final farewell to their dollar.

"Draw the second number, please," Perry ordered now. Plevel pressed the button again and once again the number six popped out. "Six," the official announced, trembling. *What have I gotten myself into?*

"Draw the third number!" And again Plevel pressed the button... and the number



The method of number-drawing at the Milan Lotto still involves blindfolding children and having them pick out numbered silver balls from a spinning drum at random. Over the years, scammers, gang members, and fraudulent officials would rig the drawing by using altered balls. Children were bribed to learn how to squint through their blindfolds, and some balls were marked so that the kids could easily see which numbers they were supposed to choose. Other balls were heated, frozen, or sprayed with a glossy coating to stand out from the rest.

six popped up again. "Six," Plevel repeated for the audience. *It's too late to turn back.*

"So!" Perry called out in his ringing voice, full of cheer, "the winning lottery number for today, April 24, is 666." Then he finished with his well-known daily salutation, "If you have this number, step forward to claim your prize! If not, I wish you better luck tomorrow!"

Nick Perry

Nick Perry was a very well-known figure in Pennsylvania. When the first television station opened there in 1949 he instantly vaulted to popularity. He was charismatic, with a witty sense of humor that charmed his viewers. In 1975 Perry was working for the local ABC office in Pittsburgh when he was hired to oversee the daily lottery drawing. The executives had complained that the previous supervisor was too boring, so ABC replaced him with Nick Perry.

At that time the steel industry that had fueled the state's economy had gone bankrupt. Thousands of Pennsylvania residents

were left without employment. Because it offered the dream of easy financial security, the state's lottery became extremely popular. For these people Perry's concluding comment, "If you have this number, step forward to claim your prize! If not, I wish you better luck tomorrow!" was a breath of fresh air. It held out the hope of a better future.

The lottery became so popular that during the daily drawing, at 7 PM, more Pennsylvania viewers tuned in to ABC than to any other television station. The Pennsylvania lottery bureau did not have its own broadcasting facility, so the drawing was held in the ABC offices in Pittsburgh. The lottery machine was stored there.

The lottery machine was kept in a room under double lock. One key was in the possession of Nick Perry, representing ABC, while the other was held by Plevel. Plevel was not only a security officer for the state lottery, but an elected city councilman as well.

One day in February 1980 Perry and Plevel were chatting over a cup of tea in the ABC offices. Suddenly, Perry spoke up, "People think the state lottery is run under the tightest security possible. It doesn't occur to them that it is possible for the numbers to be fixed."

"Nonsense!" Plevel responded with a look of dismissal. His professional pride had been wounded by the intimation that his security procedures could be easily bypassed. "There is no way in the world that the results can be fixed. We are the only people who have the keys to the lottery machine. And even if we both decided to defraud the lottery we couldn't do it. The numbers are drawn by a machine. There's no way to know in advance which numbers are going to pop up."

"And what if I tell you that there is a way for to know in advance?"

"Yeah? Go ahead—tell me how!"

The Lottery Machine

The lottery machines then in use for the Pennsylvania state lottery were identical

to those still used today in many places. It contained numerous small balls, each bearing a number from zero through nine. A motor caused the balls to spin randomly at high speed inside the transparent machine.

To make the drawing, the operator pressed a button and a vacuum inside the machine would suck in one of the balls. Three balls were drawn each day, and anyone who had those three numbers in the proper sequence was a winner.

Perry explained to Plevel that if they could fix the machine to draw up only certain balls, they could know the winning combination in advance. "And how can you pull that off?" Plevel asked Perry in astonishment.

"Very simple. You stuff the other balls so they weigh more and then they won't be sucked in by the vacuum."



A typical lottery machine which makes the drawing through a vacuum that sucks in the balls.