

Lotto – the story of the biggest game in the world

What is Lotto exactly? It is easy to prove that it is the worlds biggest game of chance by looking at global gaming statistics. You will find it in almost 80 countries and it is mostly called just Lotto or 6/49 or whatever matrix you have chosen but then there is some confusion. In some countries, mostly where English is spoken, people persist in calling it a lottery thus causing some obscurity because these two games are based on different principles. The last week in July you could read in many European newspapers that Dolores Mcnamara from Limerick in Ireland had won more than 115 million Euro on the s.k. Euromillions lottery - a misleading translation since it was about a joint Lotto game for 10 European jurisdictions.

So, just to clarify - in a lottery you sell tickets with a preprinted number and have fixed prizes for the different winning combinations. To win the numbers drawn must come in the order of the numbers on your ticket.

For Lotto on the other hand you have a set of numbers to choose from - in early days often 90, nowadays mostly 49. You are asked to make your choice either by crossing usually 6 numbers but it could be less or more on the coupon or let the terminal do it for you. What makes Lotto so charming and attractive for many players is your personal influence – or so you think – on Lady Luck or Fortuna. She is therefore the recurrent symbol for Lotto and her cornucopia represents the richness you can attain by hitting the jackpot - the major attraction for Lotto.

But how and where did it all start? On that point the learned and the handbooks disagree. You will find different stories in the books and articles that have been written about the story of gaming but lets try to find out what is historically proven and also look at some speculations. Two hundred years BC there was a game in China called pik phu thet, which means the Signs of the White Pigeon. There was a very famous picture book from which a section with 80 characters in 4 quadrats was picked. Then you randomly picked which one of these would be the basis for the draw. The result – the winning 20 numbers – was announced by sending a message by white pigeons. This is really the basic principle for bingo, keno and lotto. Is it possible that the Italian merchant and explorer Marco Polo who brought back a lot of things and ideas from his trip to China in the end of the 13th century also had the Lotto concept in his suitcases?

We will never know but we know that something happened 200 years later in Genua. Every year two new clerks for the City government should be appointed in the 15th century. You had 120 candidates to choose between. A smart man – Salvatore Gentile - came up with the idea that people could put a bet either on one of the two candidates or both that were to be elected. Later on he substituted the names by numbers 1-120 and so Lotto was born because this was the name mostly used. But some called this game The Genuese Lottery and so it is referred to in many European countries when it eventually spread outside Italy - and that is the reason why we even today have this mix up of lotteries and Lotto.

From Genua it quickly spread to other Italian cities. Early 1523 a private person tried to copy the Genua success in Venice. He did so well that the City Council immediately banned the game but two weeks later the game was offered again - now by the city itself. The Government had realized - as later many kings, dukes or other heads of state - that a lottery or Lotto is a perfect way of raising money or make the citizens pay a voluntary kind of tax for good causes, in the Venice case to pay for troops that could defend the state and make its position stronger. We

know from many documents and drawings that the draws were quite spectacular events. The duke or somebody else to represent him supervised the draw. There were soldiers in beautiful uniforms to guard the tombola and see to it that the populace would not be able to interfere. The draw was always carried out by an orphan boy, dressed up in white (the colour of innocence) and yellow (to symbolize the sun and fortune-gold). Of course the young boy was blindfolded when he reached for 5 out of the 90 sealed scrolls in the tombola.

Many Venetians gladly came to the agents to have their bets recorded - manually of course and you just got a little paper as a receipt for your play. You could win goods or money - the latter was of course what people preferred.

There are also many documents from Naples e.g. one from 1643 about the *seminario di Lotto*. From now on this is the name used for this game. To make Lotto more socially and morally accepted the operator introduced a novelty. For every number (now the number had been fixed to 90) there was the name of a poor girl to go with it who was keen on getting married but could not do so because she had no dowry. When the five numbers had been drawn there were also 5 lucky maidens who got their share of the revenue from the Lotto round so they could find a husband. This idea was later copied e.g. in Austria, Germany and Sweden. Lotto spread to other cities which organised their own draws. Even today the Italian Lotto draw is a complicated story with simultaneous draws in 15 cities. Lotto quickly became an integrated part of everyday life in Italy and has remained so until today.

Getting 5 numbers correct out of 90 is not easy at all, on the contrary the odds are 1 in 43 millions. Therefore most players instead bet on having just one number - an *extract* - or two correct - an *ambe*. At this time Lotto was not a pooled game so there were fixed prizes for the dividends as many lotteries today have for Keno or 4-digit numbers games. An *extrait* paid 15 times your stake and an *ambe* 270 times. A *terne* (3 correct) returned you 3 200 your money and a *quaterne* (4) as much as 64 000. In some lotteries you were allowed to go for a *quinterne* (5) with a yield of 40 million times your wager from Fortunas cornucopia. Smart operators realized that this would be too much for them to pay out so they very often blocked this option. In Sweden there was a state Lotto from 1773 until 1841 and no one hit the jackpot for 68 years. No wonder then that the game was banned following a trend all over the northern part of Europe. Lotto had from the mid 18th century become very popular in some countries. The first one to have a national Lotto was Austria-Hungary where the Empress Maria Theresia let a private person for a concession fee start a *Zahlenlotto* in 1750 - a game that still exists. Germany was to follow. Casanova persuaded Frederic the Great to have a state Lotto in Prussia so he could afford his army and horses (very soon he leased this to a mister Calsabigi, an adventurer who first failed then succeeded in being a lottery operator in northern Europe. Bavaria had a Lotto, so did Cologne. In Scandinavia Sweden was the only country to open its arms (and the state coffer) the *genuense* lottery.

You can see from the high number of Lotto books and annual calendars and drawings/etchings from 1750 onwards how popular the game was. Goethe referred to it in his play Faust where Mefistoteles says > Every monkey now plays Lotto. One Austrian professor has tried to prove that Mozart, who loved all kinds of gaming, played Lotto from a set of 5 numbers jotted down on a late composition, written when he lived in Domgasse 5 in Vienna, only 200 metres away from the oldest still existing *Kollektur*, e.g. Lotto outlet, in the world. (All winning numbers have been chequed from this period. If Mozart played - he did not win!)

But of course there was a strong anti-Lotto movement as well. The church did not like the idea that people should find happiness and richness on earth instead of Heaven. The Vatican state stopped Lotto for some years in the 18th century but was forced to lift the ban very soon.

The core values of the growing bourgeoisie were hard work and compensation for this by set wages or salaries - not a quick wealth by being lucky with your Lotto numbers. The French revolution honoured egalite, fraternite and liberte and meant that this was contrary to the Lotto idea and so the game was banned (even if it made a come-back some years later). Lotto was also accused of causing addiction and that poor and uneducated persons played for more money than they could afford. The strong anti-gaming wave thus eventually led to the abolition of Lotto and lotteries in Northern Europe. This lasted until the mid-30s of the 20th century, in some countries even until after WW2.

Funnily enough Lotto survived in another shape – as a parlor game. I remember from my childhood how we played a Lotto from the beginning of the 19th century which was very similar to Bingo or Housie where you marked numbers on a plate from the numbers that had been called by pulling small wooden numbered balls from a little sack. In Germany and France there were quite a few educational Lotto party games, Historical Lotto, Geographical Lotto etc. So when Lotto returned as a game where money could be won it had to fight the general connotation of it being a childrens game.

All this was however to change in 1955.

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