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Lotto fever isn't what it used to be

Skyscraping jackpots aren't so rare anymore

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Sure, there was a buzz yesterday. Sure, people dreamed. Sure, people blacked out their favorite numbers – birthdays and anniversaries – hoping for luck to strike.

The chance to win a cool \$250 million, though, didn't seem to draw the crazed stampede of wannabe Trumps that it has in the past. In 1984, a then-record \$40 million jackpot in Illinois actually caused people to fly in from overseas to take a stab at it.

Huge jackpots such as the one offered by the Mega Millions lottery in California and 11 other states last night are no longer seen as the rare, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities they once were.

"It's not a unique event," said Michael Jones, former head of the Illinois Lottery and now a lottery consultant. "It happens four or five times a year."

People today also have more gambling options – such as the growth of Indian casinos in San Diego County – that hurt the lottery, others argue. Gamblers say the odds of winning in a casino are better than winning the lottery, and the experience is far more electric.

Frank Trejo, a mobile home park maintenance worker, bought a \$1 ticket yesterday at the South Bay Liquor Store in a strip mall in Chula Vista.

Trejo's co-worker, Juan Rodriguez, also put down \$1, but both men said they tend to go to casinos more these days. Trejo said casinos offer smaller jackpots but are more fun.

"You entertain yourself and forget everything – all your bills," Trejo said.

At one point, Mega Millions sales in California were expected to fall 37 percent below budget for the fiscal year that ended June 30. The final numbers aren't out, but the lottery got a boost when a Mega Millions jackpot reached a record \$390 million in March. A lack of big jackpots was to blame for poor sales, lottery officials said.

This week, California's Mega Millions sales more than doubled to \$19 million. But the excitement level didn't match what it was in, say, 1988, when the California Lottery – with a \$51 million prize at stake – had to create something called the Lottery Fever Management Team to deal with the demand on outlets.

In one day alone, \$33 million in tickets were sold.

That was when the California Lottery, now 22 years old, pretty much stood alone. Las Vegas-style Indian casinos weren't approved until 2000, and now San Diego County has 10, more than any other county in the United States.

"The lottery used to be the only game in town," said Marc Lefkowitz, executive vice president of the California Council on Problem Gambling. "And people only have so many gambling dollars to spend."

Sales for California's homegrown big-money game, SuperLotto, were once projected to fall 12 percent below budget for fiscal 2006. The next drawing for SuperLotto Plus, at \$87 million, is tonight.

It's no accident that jackpots tend to be bigger these days. That's because the odds of winning them are slimmer, making it more likely that the jackpot will grow. The odds of winning Mega Millions? It's one in 175,711,536.

Even progressive slots – the longest of long shots in a casino – have better odds at roughly 40 million to one.

The California Lottery doesn't consider casinos competition because the games and gambling experiences are different, said Cathy Johnston, a lottery spokeswoman.

People buying lottery tickets yesterday had a different opinion. Christian Gutierrez, who works in sales, spent \$3 and let his 3-year-old son, Christian Jr., pick one set of numbers at the South Bay Liquor Store. Gutierrez said he only plays when the jackpot is at least \$100 million.

Gutierrez used to play a lot, putting down \$100 or \$200 at a time, but he now buys a lottery ticket occasionally without expecting to win.

"It's just for fun," he said.

These days, Gutierrez prefers going to casinos.

"You get more for your money," he said. "Even if you lose, you've had your fun."

Some gamblers interviewed at Harrah's Rincon Casino yesterday said they shy away from the lottery, regardless of the jackpot size.

It's that vast disconnect between the obscene size of the jackpot and the unreality of attaining it that bothers him, said Mike Bares, a trucker whose wife, Connie, is his driving partner. A few hours of pulling slots may yield a more humble jackpot, but it's one Bares said he feels more connected to.

Patricia Barnese of Northridge once played the California Lottery, but it got too complicated, she said. Two weeks ago, Barnese tried it again and bought 15 Lotto tickets. She hit only one number and found the whole exercise depressing, she said.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger floated a plan this year to privatize the lottery, arguing that it could be run more efficiently. A number of states are looking at privatization as a way to boost what they consider underperforming lotteries.

Jones, the former Illinois lottery director, said he thinks lotteries still can capture the public's imagination, despite increasing competition. People who like to gamble like to play the lottery, he said. The goal is to capture people who don't normally play.

"Then and now, the fascination factor remains," Jones said of those dizzying jackpots.

Staff writers Tanya Mannes and Lisa Petrillo contributed to this story.

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