

I avoid winning the lottery

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The Mega Millions lottery reached \$656 million last week so I threw in the towel and bought five tickets at a buck apiece. This was my first dip into fantasyland.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I said to myself. A penny saved is a penny earned, some Scroogian ancestor shouted in my ear. Like others, I usually find myself at the center of conflicting impulses.

I've always thought that gambling -- "gaming," is the airbrushed term -- was a sucker's bet. Play against the house long enough, and you will lose everything, because the house always has an odds advantage. When card counters win at blackjack, they are banned from casinos for using their brains. Casinos discourage thinking, which they call, "cheating."

Public lotteries strip all risk out of gaming—from the house perspective. The payout is a percentage of gross ticket sales, which means that every lottery organizer wins every time it runs a game. Last week's Mega Millions took in about \$1.5 billion and paid out only 44 percent to the three winning numbers. About 35 percent ends up in state treasuries, and the rest goes to advertising, overhead and the stores that sell tickets.

Everyone knows that gaming is rigged against players. And everyone knows one other thing, someone wins a lottery.

Despite the odds, the lure of quick, unearned, effortless wealth seduced me. Someone, after all, was going to win more than \$300 million after taxes.

This got me to wonder about what I would do with all that money.

Big lottery winnings change lives. Many winners become targets and victims. They become the agent of their own fall. Nice people as well as not-so-nice people ask for money. Thieves steal it. Some sue for it. Big money doesn't bring out the best in everyone.

Since I didn't want to fall prey to The Winner's Curse, I decided I'd better plot out what I would *not* do with my \$300 million.

First, I would not spend any of it on myself...for a good long while. I don't need anything. And with all that money, I couldn't imagine "needing" anything in the future.

Apart from needs, what "wants" would I not fulfill?

Well, there has been talk about a new tractor, but if I don't need one, then I don't really want it very much.

Same with a new suit. Shopping for clothes is worse than going to a funeral of someone I didn't like. I have to try on one ill-fitting garment after another, then run around menswear with my shoelaces untied while strangers draw chalk lines on me, grimace and shake their heads. I cannot escape seeing what I look like from the back. Most tailors I've run into -- even the custom guys -- mutter a lot when I appear so I've stopped appearing.

How about a fancy car? The last time I went car shopping I told the salesman I wanted one with as few bells as possible and no whistles. He failed to understand why I didn't want a JumboTron in the back seat and my own cellular phone company on the dash.

I also plan to resist dropping a new, 530-hp Porsche engine in The Cheetah, my 1980 farm truck with 300,000 miles whose current personal best is a hearty 15 mph.

A yacht? I like to sail, but Melissa gets seasick—at least when she sails with me. I also like small boats where you can feel moving through the water, not the motionless clunkers that make you think you're stuck in the lobby of a Ritz-Carlton.

I considered hiring a full-time chef who, out here, is called a "cook." But that gets a little tricky. I'd have to enlarge, remodel and reequip our kitchen to accommodate the chef who would insist on a dozen underchefs. We'd end up with a kitchen the size of the Pentagon and a fusion menu of organic North Korean rice with loose-hipped Brazilian salsas.

I don't think I'd pay off our mortgage. It's probably a good idea to keep in touch with the daily fear of a monthly payment even if it's contrived for self-delusional effect.

If I bought more books, I'd feel more guilty about not reading them.

I don't anticipate a spree of dope, booze, gambling and hookers, but I often misjudge my core rectitude.

Spending \$300 million is hard work after you eliminate all that you don't need and want.

My wife and daughter would, of course, have claims to the cash.

I guessed that Melissa would stop practicing law and start running a horse-rescue farm that she'd staff with a full-time college of veterinarians. She likes Percherons and Clydesdales—big lugs, which explains my appeal.

When I conducted a field interview with her the other night, she said she'd stick with a part-time practice and give away a lot of money, particularly to food banks. She wouldn't rule out buying a place where it's warm in the winter.

Molly says that she would pay off loans—hers, ours, her boyfriend's; take Melissa to Machu Picchu (and presumably bring her back); set up a

travel fund; give some away; and then put the rest into a high-interest certificate of deposit or something other than the stock market, about which she writes each day for Bloomberg News.

None of us were able to wrap our minds around spending, investing, protecting and managing that much money. Spend a little, park some in a trust and give it away—that's the best we could do.

One odd thought did come to mind. I could shape the 2012 presidential election by putting \$100 million into a super PAC and running negative ads against the candidate I opposed.

I would, of course, expect a *quid pro quo*, though I would never say so in public, because then my efforts to educate my fellow citizens through the exercise of my First Amendment free-speech right would look like a bribe. There's a big difference between a political *quid pro quo* and a bribe, beginning with their spelling and ending with the number of syllables.

For another \$100 million I could buy a Congressional majority.

Two hundred million would be just two-thirds of my easy-come pot. It's not a lot of money, relatively speaking.

I would, like Melissa and Molly, donate to worthy causes. I would put money into a couple of medical-research and health-related projects, plant trees, give books away and disable all cell phones. I would also fund a couple of magazines, which are things printed on paper and sent through the U.S. mail. (The Smithsonian has a wonderful collection.)

I would give money to family and friends, the number of whom would, I assume, grow daily. Experts told me that I should expect one paternity suit for each million in winnings.

It's a good thing I didn't win. I didn't deserve it. I didn't do adequate planning. I wouldn't know what to do with almost all of it.

I need to expand my list of things I neither need nor want.

But next time, I'll be ready.

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