

A Winning Streak That Defies Odds

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Pasquale Benenati says he *feels* his winning streak—a sensation invades him in a physical “rush.” Irene Benenati thinks a potent force field of magnetism might emanate from her husband.

Whatever the mystical mechanism, Benenati, a 59-year-old businessman from Riverside, has been recognized by the California State Lottery as the luckiest winner in the game's five-year history: His numerous winnings add up to more than \$5.35 million.

In March, 1989, Benenati won a \$5.18-million Lotto jackpot, selecting all six of the winning numbers—at odds of 1 in 22.9 million.

On Nov. 2, he claimed five of the six winning numbers and the bonus number, becoming the first

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person to win all Lotto prize categories—three out of six, four out of six, five out of six and the jackpot—plus all prize categories in Little Lotto except the \$500,000 bonanza. Indeed, enumerating Benenati's wins requires an accountant's patience with ledgers.

In the Lotto game, he has won three times for picking five out of the six lucky numbers (with odds at a mere 1 in 3.8 million), receiving \$7,218, \$2,819 and \$3,847.

He picks three and four of the six numbers on an almost weekly basis, collecting individual pots ranging from \$5 to more than \$100. Benenati allows that a friend once told him: "It's almost obvious."

But only almost.

For Benenati, luck is not unconnected to reason or worthiness. He is a hard-working man who always believed that something special would come his way.

The son of Italian immigrants—his father was a carpenter and his mother, a seamstress—Benenati was raised in Boston, graduated from Boston College with a degree in mathematics and studied photography and mapping, at Syracuse University. After four years in the Air Force and a stint at another company, Benenati opened his own aerial surveying firm, Aero Tech Surveys Inc., in 1975, in Riverside. He put \$2,600 of his money into the business and borrowed \$25,000. Last year, the company, which has a staff of 11, reported earnings of \$1.2 million.

As the company prospered, so did Benenati's sense of himself as a winner who could beat the odds. "I felt very strongly that I could win. It was just a matter of time."

he says, sitting in a high-backed chair in his company's conference room.

An intense, wiry man, he likes to be in command and demonstrates a clearly masculine feel for authority. When asked how many children he has, he refers the question to Irene Benenati, who sits across the table. "I lose count," he says. (The couple has eight children, six from previous marriages.)

"He's driven," Irene Benenati says later of her husband's seven-day-a-week work schedule. A congenial, rosy woman 20 years his

piles and piles of chips."

Benenati says he won the maximum \$720 pot. And, he says, he did it two more times during the weekend—betting again on 32 and once on 15.

Irene Benenati thinks that just being near her husband can bring luck to other people.

Under his auspices, Benenati says, his mother once won two back-to-back jackpots of \$700 each at the slot machines.

Once, to divert a bag lady who was ogling the silver dollars cascading from Benenati's slot ma-

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PASQUALE BENENATI

Lottery winner

junior, she says she works in the office, and earned her pilot's license to boot, so that she could spend time with him.

Benenati says he didn't play games of chance before the lottery came along, but he's a man who's always liked games of chance. "I like to gamble. I like to challenge the statistics."

Indeed, along with his luck at the lottery, Benenati has discovered he has a magic touch at the gaming tables, and talks with a sportsman's bravura about his exploits in Las Vegas.

On a family trip last July, he recounts, he took his two daughters up to the roulette table, saying, "Here's a good game, girls."

"Lo and behold, I loaded up on my favorite number, 32, and it came straight up. The girls looked at me in awe when the croupier started handing me my chips—

holds into print.

"He believes he will see those numbers and he does," says Irene Benenati.

"This is my entertainment," Benenati adds. "I can't wait for Tuesday and Wednesday nights and then for Friday and Saturday nights. After the children are in bed I play my game."

Settled in his easy chair in the family room (he always sits in the same place), he reads the sequences in solitude, putting the paper aside if he is interrupted.

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It's the same sense Benenati gets when he's at the roulette table, "I feel a rush," he says. His adrenaline flows faster, his pulse increases, a warmth envelops him. "I'm not joking," he insists.

He will admit to no other secrets ("Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you"), though he does say that not only the number 32 (he was born in 1932) but also its reverse, 23, has been good to him.

A more mundane ritual is to play consistently. Since his big win, Benenati pays out \$500 a week, splitting the sum between Lotto and Little Lotto (jackpot winners can deduct gaming expenses from federal taxes up to the amount of their annual payments, the IRS says). When he won the jackpot, he was spending \$40 a week on the games.

Benenati plans to continue to play until he wins the elusive Little Lotto jackpot. And after that?

"What's left," he asserts, "is simply to start over and do it again."