

= Michael Larson =

Paul Michael Larson (May 10 , 1949 ? February 16 , 1999) was a contestant on the American television game show Press Your Luck in 1984 . Larson is notable for winning \$ 110 @, @ 237 (equivalent to \$ 251 @, @ 000 in 2015) in cash and prizes , at the time the largest one @- @ day total ever won on a game show . He was able to win by memorizing the patterns used on the Press Your Luck game board .

Originally from southwestern Ohio , Larson used his cash winnings for taxes and real estate investments . However , he also had problems with the law and was involved in illegal schemes . As a result , Larson lost all of his winnings within two years of the show 's taping and moved to Florida , where he later died of throat cancer at the age of 49 . Since his death in 1999 , Larson 's game has re @- @ aired on TV at various times and inspired the 2003 Game Show Network documentary Big Bucks : The Press Your Luck Scandal .

= = Preparations = =

Larson began recording episodes of Press Your Luck shortly after its premiere on CBS in September 1983 . Through a careful study of the light indicator used for its eighteen @- @ square " Big Board " , Larson discovered that it always moved in one of five looping patterns . By memorizing these patterns , or at least parts of them , he would be able to predict which squares the indicator would move to next .

He also discovered that the fourth and eighth squares (when numbered beginning at # 1 in the top left hand corner and then moving clockwise along the board) always contained cash , never had a Whammy in them , and , most importantly , both of those squares also rewarded contestants with an extra spin of the board when hit . Square # 4 contained \$ 3 @, @ 000 , \$ 4 @, @ 000 , and \$ 5 @, @ 000 , while square # 8 contained \$ 500 , \$ 750 , and \$ 1 @, @ 000 , all of those amounts came with an additional spin . The extra spins meant that Larson , at least in the second round , could play on for as long as he dared and never have to stop at a Whammy if he managed to follow the patterns he discovered .

Carrying this knowledge and using nearly all of his saved money to make the trip to Los Angeles , Larson traveled to CBS Television City to audition for Press Your Luck . The program 's executive producer Bill Carruthers and contestant supervisor Bobby Edwards discussed whether to have him on the show after his tryout interview ; Edwards was suspicious of Larson and his reasons for trying out , but Carruthers was not . The final decision was to let him on , so he was booked for the show and later chosen for the fourth taping of that day , May 19 , 1984 , intended as a Friday episode . For the rest of his life , Carruthers would say that he regretted not listening to Edwards .

While waiting in the green room , Larson met Ed Long , a Baptist minister booked for the third taping , and they struck up a conversation . Long recalled that at one point , Larson , who had watched Press Your Luck a lot , asked him how many times he had seen the show . When Long replied that he had only seen it once , Larson responded by looking at him as though he " were from another planet . " Soon , Long was called up to go on the show and as he left , Larson said to him , " I really hope we don 't have to play each other . " As it turned out , Larson would in fact have to face Long (who won \$ 11 @, @ 516 in his first game and returned for a second game) and a dental assistant named Janie Litras .

= = The game = =

= = = First round = = =

As always , the game began with the first of two question rounds in which contestants answered questions to earn spins for the Big Board ; a correct buzz @- @ in answer earned three spins , while a correct multiple @- @ choice answer earned one spin . Larson 's memorization of the patterns

could not help him here , and he struggled early . On the second question , host Peter Tomarken asked , " You 've probably got President Franklin D. Roosevelt in your pocket or purse right now , because his likeness is on the head side " . Larson buzzed in at this point and answered , " \$ 50 bill " , after which Tomarken finished the question " of what American coin ? " with the answer being " a dime " ; the other choice was " a nickel " . He did not buzz in again , answering the last two questions multiple choice and finishing with three spins , behind Long 's four and Litras 's ten . With the fewest spins , Larson went first . On his first spin , he hit a Whammy ; however , on his next two , he hit square # 4 for \$ 1 @, @ 250 and finished the round with \$ 2 @, @ 500 . Long and Litras finished the round without a Whammy and won \$ 4 @, @ 080 and \$ 4 @, @ 608 , respectively , putting Larson in last place .

= = = Second round = = =

After the first two questions in the second round , Long had not earned any spins while Larson and Litras had each received one . Larson successfully buzzed in on the final two questions to earn six more spins , for a total of seven , while Long finished with two and Litras with three . Because Larson was in last place in the first Big Board round , he got to use his spins first in the second round . He went to his pattern play , aiming for squares # 4 and # 8 .

Larson quickly bumped his total to over \$ 10 @, @ 000 . Early on , his pattern play was irregular , as he stopped four times on squares that did not follow his pattern : a trip to Kauai worth \$ 1 @, @ 636 in square # 7 , \$ 700 and one spin in square # 17 ; " Pick a Corner " in square # 6 (where he was given the choice of \$ 2 @, @ 250 in square # 1 , \$ 2 @, @ 000 in square # 10 , or \$ 1 @, @ 500 and one spin in square # 15 ? he chose \$ 2 @, @ 250) ; and a sailboat worth \$ 1 @, @ 015 in square # 7 .

After the sailboat , Larson 's pattern play became more accurate , as he hit his target squares each time he spun . Tomarken was increasingly astounded that Larson was still spinning despite not having seen a Whammy for so long . At the point where he exceeded \$ 36 @, @ 000 , the episode was post @-@ edited for Tomarken to announce that they had run out of time and that the game would resume the following Monday . As part two of the episode began , Tomarken explained to viewers who missed the Friday show what was going on , and the game resumed .

Larson continued to press on , exceeding \$ 60 @, @ 000 without losing any of his four remaining spins . Tomarken virtually begged Larson to stop more than once , fearing he would hit a Whammy . Finally , Larson surpassed the six @-@ figure mark at \$ 102 @, @ 851 . He then passed his remaining four spins to Litras (who had the second highest total at \$ 4 @, @ 608) raised his arms in triumph , and received a standing ovation from the audience . Long , who took the next spin , immediately hit a Whammy and lost the \$ 4 @, @ 080 he racked up in the first round , leading Tomarken to wonder aloud if Larson " knew that the Whammy was coming . " He then hit \$ 5 @, @ 000 + ONE SPIN twice before pressing on and hitting another Whammy , costing him \$ 10 @, @ 000 and effectively ending his participation in the game .

Litras hit a Whammy on her first spin as well , which was one of the spins passed to her by Larson , and lost the \$ 4 @, @ 608 she won in the first round . The remaining three passed spins were moved to the earned column after hitting the Whammy , giving her six spins . In five successful spins , she accumulated \$ 9 @, @ 385 . Litras then decided that she would pass her remaining spins , which totalled three . Since the rules dictated that any passed spins go to the leader , this gave Larson another turn at the board that he had not been expecting .

Since Larson did not earn the spins , he was forced to take them one at a time . He picked right back up where he had left off for the first two spins , hitting targets and earning spins with which he could do whatever he wanted , but deviated from his pattern by stopping the board early . Larson won a trip to The Bahamas worth \$ 2 @, @ 636 but landed on a square with a Whammy that had just turned .

With his score now at \$ 110 @, @ 237 and now in possession of a pair of earned spins , Larson returned the favor and passed both spins back to Litras . Though Litras took both spins safely , she earned no additional spins with them . Her final spin ended with her landing on a Mexican cruise in

square # 15 , and lost the game by a huge margin . Larson won the game with \$ 110 @,@ 237 ; of this , \$ 104 @,@ 950 was in cash .

At the end of the episode , Tomarken asked Larson why he decided not to pass his remaining spins before he did , considering the lead he rapidly gained over Litras and Long . Side @-@ stepping revealing how he had won the game , Larson responded with , " Two things : one , it felt right , and second , I still had seven spins and if I passed them , somebody could 've done what I did . "

= = Accusations of cheating = =

While Larson was running up the score , the show 's producers contacted Michael Brockman , then head of CBS ' daytime programming department . In a 1994 TV Guide interview commemorating the Larson Sweep , conducted at the time the movie Quiz Show was released , he recalled " Something was very wrong . Here was this guy from nowhere , and he was hitting the bonus box every time . It was bedlam , I can tell you . And we couldn 't stop this guy . He kept going around the board and hitting that box . "

The program 's producers and Brockman met to review the videotape . They noticed that Larson would immediately celebrate after many of his spins instead of waiting the fraction of a second it would take for a contestant to see and respond to the space he or she had stopped on , effectively showing he knew he was going to get something good . It was also noticed that Larson had an unusual reaction to his early prize of a Kauai trip , which was out of his pattern ? he initially looked puzzled and upset , but then recovered and celebrated after a pause .

At first , CBS refused to pay Larson , considering him a cheater . However , Brockman and the producers could not find a clause in the game 's rules with which to disqualify him (largely because the board had been constructed with these patterns from the beginning of the series) , and the network complied . Because he had surpassed the CBS winnings cap (at the time) of \$ 25 @,@ 000 , Larson was not allowed to return for the next show .

The five light patterns on the Big Board were immediately erased and replaced with five new ones for about a month . Then , to make sure no one was memorizing those , they were again replaced with five new patterns for another month . Finally in August , new software was installed which gave the Big Board a total of 32 patterns , effectively ensuring that no one would ever duplicate Larson 's trick .

= = Episode broadcasts = =

Due to its exceptional running time , Larson 's appearance was split into two episodes , which aired on June 8 and 11 , 1984 . CBS then suppressed them for 19 years , as both the network and Carruthers at that time considered the incident to be one of their biggest embarrassments . When USA Network (and later , GSN) bought the rights to rerun Press Your Luck , CBS and Carruthers insisted that the Larson episodes must not be aired .

On March 16 , 2003 , GSN was allowed to air the episodes , including a few previously edited @-@ out portions , as part of a two @-@ hour documentary called Big Bucks : The Press Your Luck Scandal , hosted and narrated by Tomarken . The documentary was produced by and aired on GSN (in association with Lionsgate and FremantleMedia , the latter of which now owns the rights to Press Your Luck) , and broke all previous viewership records for the network . The original telecast was dedicated to the memory of Bill Carruthers , producer / creator of Press Your Luck , who had died before the airing .

As part of the commemoration , Larson 's opponents from 1984 were invited back to be contestants on Whammy ! The All @-@ New Press Your Luck playing against Larson 's brother , James , with Tomarken returning to host the Question Round . Despite the fact that the board was now more random (host Todd Newton calling it " Larson @-@ proof ") , and there was no way the same trick could have been performed , Long and Litras (who had remarried and took the surname Litras @-@ Dakan) still lost . When Larson hit the Big Bank space on his first spin of the first round , Long proceeded to joke with host Todd Newton that he had " seen this before " . At one point , Litras

@-@ Dakan advanced to first place before hitting a Double Whammy shortly afterward , effectively giving Larson the win . Larson won a digital grand piano worth \$ 6 @,@ 695 , while Newton closed the game by announcing , " The legacy continues " .

The two Larson episodes finally aired in their entirety on GSN in late 2003 and were shown in regular rotation and on special occasions until the network ceased showing Press Your Luck in March 2009 . However , the Big Bucks documentary included additional footage , directly from the original master tapes , that had been edited out of the episodes for their initial broadcast . Larson 's performance on Press Your Luck was also featured in a July 2010 broadcast of This American Life .

= = Later life and legacy = =

After Press Your Luck , Larson became an assistant manager at local Walmart stores in Dayton , Lebanon , Xenia and Bellbrook , Ohio . He also ran a promotions and marketing company , Group Dynamics Downline , out of his Lebanon home .

In November 1984 , Larson learned about a local radio show promotion promising a \$ 30 @,@ 000 prize for matching a \$ 1 bill 's serial number with a random number read out on the air . Over several days , he withdrew his remaining winnings in \$ 1 bills , examined each dollar , and (upon discovering that he did not have the winning number) re @-@ deposited roughly half of the money . Larson left around \$ 50 @,@ 000 in his house , which was stolen in a burglary while he was attending a Christmas party . The case still remains open today .

Larson gave an interview with TV Guide in 1994 , in which he revealed to have called the producers of Press Your Luck after losing most of his remaining money , challenging them to hold a tournament of champions to see if he could break the bank again . The producers declined .

In 1994 , the film Quiz Show was released and , as part of the renewed discussion on game show scandals , Larson appeared on ABC 's Good Morning America . By this time , he had been diagnosed with throat cancer , and his voice was noticeably weakened .

Shortly thereafter , Larson got involved with an illegal scheme to sell part of a foreign lottery . As a result , he went on the run , leaving Ohio . His family was contacted by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission , the Internal Revenue Service , and the Federal Bureau of Investigation , but no one knew his whereabouts until his death from throat cancer on February 16 , 1999 , in Apopka , Florida .

In 2000 , a biopic was planned , with Bill Murray set to portray Larson ; however , those plans fell through .