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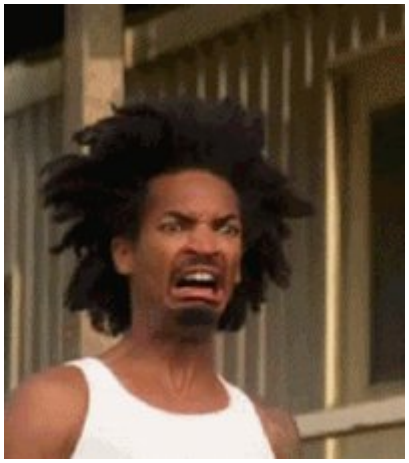


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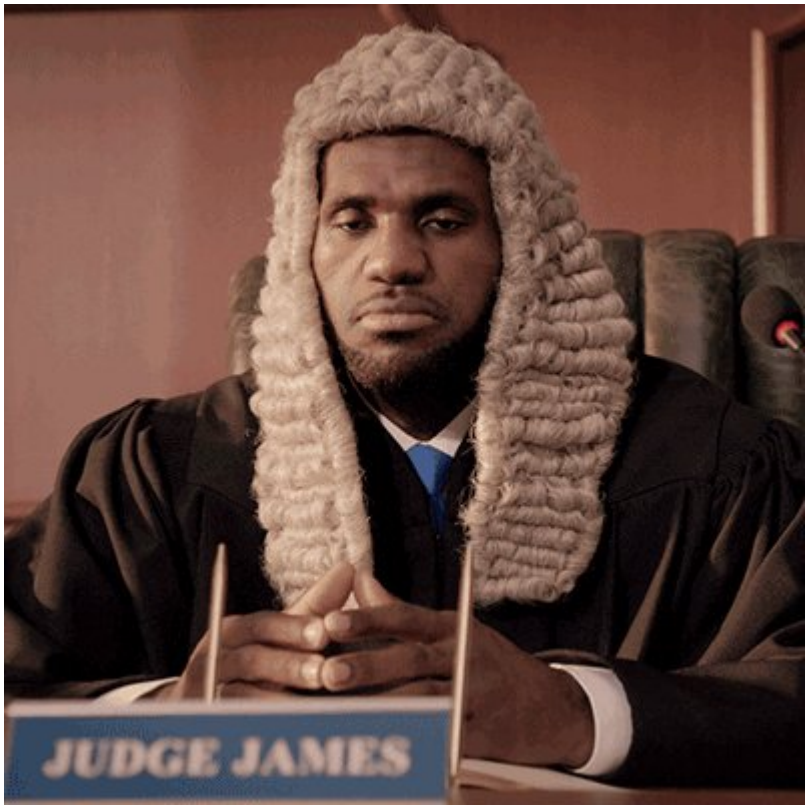
Regina Wamuyu Githaiga purchased a ticket number 003096663 for Sh65 on December 3, 2005. She was given part 'A' of the ticket and First Lotto sales agent — at an outlet managed by Sammy Kariuki Wambugu — retained part 'B' and 'C' of the coupon as per the rules. - @NationAfrica

Her combination won a jackpot of Sh12 million during a draw the next day. Excited, she rushed to the company to claim her prize, but soon learnt that getting her Sh12 million would not be a walk in the park.

Wamuyu presented her winning coupon on December 6, but the joke was on her. The lottery she had won was only in her dreams. The company disowned its own tickets and said no one had ever won the jackpot on offer.



Shocked, she moved to court, but the firm rushed to block her application as well as challenge the jurisdiction of the court. Presiding judge Festus Azangalala allowed the case to proceed to trial as he noted that a few issues caused him anxiety in the application.



One issue was the rules and regulations section of the lottery, which stated that winning claims would only be paid out upon comparison with and verification of slips “A” and “B” .



What left the court more bewildered, however, was the rule that warned that, notwithstanding anything contained in the rules, “the verification of any winning number shall vest with First Lotto Ltd and such decision on verification shall be conclusive and final”.



The other rule was that, in playing the lottery, the purchaser agreed to be bound by the regulations. In short, the company had the power to decide if you were a winner or not, regardless of what your coupons said, at the verification stage.



Wamuyu believed she had won Sh12 million based on the rules of the lottery. First Lotto told her to stop hallucinating. She had won nought.



The stories had been catchy, the photos charming, and the dummy cheques mouthwatering. This was gambling on steroids. Money was falling from the trees and Kenyans were scrambling for the windfall, placing bet after bet after bet.



For the men and women behind the curtains of swanky offices, this wasn't betting; this was manna. Mouthwatering manna. For the house never loses.



First Lotto, one of the betting firms cashing in on the craze, was basking in the glee of a successful popularisation campaign.

It announced that anyone who played its lottery game, based on the numbers between 1and 49, and complied with the rules had a chance to win huge cash prizes during a draw every Sunday on live TV.

Guerassim Nikolov, the flamboyant, charming but ruthless Bulgarian billionaire who several years later would emerge as the main engine behind SportPesa, was the man behind the blitz.

It was his first shot at betting, which he had imported into Kenya months earlier with the help of former Nairobi Mayor Dick Wathika.

Five years later, on the last weekend of 2010, excited employees of First Lotto, which ran the Toto 6/49 lottery, woke up to go to work, like they had done the whole of that year.

This, though, was not just any other working day; it was the most important moment in the history of the company as its biggest jackpot of Sh20 million was up for grabs.

Eager workers arrived at the company's HQs in Parklands, to find empty offices.

Almost everyone had vanished, except about four bewildered colleagues, among them technicians, the human resource manager, an accountant and a supervisor who was running the show. None of them had any answers on what had just happened.



With the firm closed abruptly on the morning of its biggest bet yet, ticket sellers were now carrying worthless coupons. Hopeful punters, who were expecting to be winners of what was Kenya's biggest jackpot prize at the time, were chasing

wind.



Guerassim Nikolov, who would months later set up SportPesa, had done a disappearing act, and there was little his loyal workers could do about that. The first instinct was to grab whatever was left of the company's assets as compensation for the period they had gone without pay.



A supervisor took off with all the daily ticket sales. A driver drove off with a pick-up truck that has never been recovered to date. The rest grabbed whatever assets they could lay their hands on.



The company that Nikolov had founded, and which had propelled him to his fortune, had simply disappeared from the surface of the earth. And that without paying the jackpot it had promised.

In 2008, Fidelity Commercial Bank, filed a winding up petition against First Lotto over a Sh3.6M debt.

Granting the request, High Court judge Luka Kimaru directed that the company be wound up “on account of its inability to pay its debts” and asked Fidelity Bank to appoint a liquidator for the purpose of winding up the company.



And with that, First Lotto Limited ceased to exist, both physically and legally. The next stop for Nikolov and his Bulgarian friends was @SportPesa.



False wins, court cases and how betting firms took Kenyanw for a ride https://t.co/u5sZtowqkS via @NationAfrica