



Red Card: How the U.S. Blew the Whistle on the World's Biggest Sports Scandal

Ken Bensinger

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The definitive, shocking account of the FIFA scandal—the biggest international corruption case of recent years, spearheaded by US investigators, involving dozens of countries, and implicating nearly every aspect of the world's most popular sport, soccer, including its biggest event, the World Cup.

The FIFA case began small, boosted by an IRS agent's review of an American soccer official's tax returns. But that humble investigation eventually led to a huge worldwide corruption scandal that crossed continents and reached the highest levels of the soccer's world governing body in Switzerland.

In *Red Card*, Ken Bensinger explores the case, and the personalities behind it, in vivid detail. There's Chuck Blazer, a high-living soccer dad who ascended to the highest ranks of the sport while creaming millions from its coffers; Jack Warner, a Trinidadian soccer official whose lust for power was matched only by his boundless greed; and the sport's most powerful man, FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who held on to his position at any cost even as soccer rotted from the inside out.

Remarkably, this corruption existed for decades before American law enforcement officials began to secretly dig, finally revealing that nearly every aspect of the planet's favorite sport was corrupted by bribes, kickbacks, fraud, and money laundering. Not even the World Cup, the most-watched sporting event in history, was safe from the thick web of corruption, as powerful FIFA officials extracted their bribes at every turn. Arriving just in time for the 2018 World Cup, *Red Card* goes beyond the headlines to bring the real story to light, accompanying the determined American prosecutors and special agents who uncovered what proved to be not only the biggest scandal in sports history, but one of the biggest international corruption cases ever. And it is far from over.

Red Card: How the U.S. Blew the Whistle on the World's Biggest Sports Scandal Details

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Victoria says

Thanks to Netgalley and Simon and Schuster for the ARC of this non-fiction title. This book, outlining the investigation into professional soccer corruption, was fascinating. It wasn't hard to separate the good guys from the bad guys here and I found myself really rooting for the US law enforcement members that were tasked with unraveling a highly complex international operation. Score one for the good guys. I know I won't be able to see any World Cup games this year without thinking about this book, and how the hosts were chosen. Highly recommend this book for crime fans, soccer fans, and general sports fans.

Myles says

Here is a good story rushed out to press a little too quickly in order to cash in on the buzz around the 2018 World Cup.

Massive corruption in the ranks of FIFA, high and low, is now well documented thanks to the perseverance of the US Internal Revenue Service, the FBI, and regional Justice Department prosecutors.

Not many people went to jail fully three years after the initial indictments, and hundreds of millions of contraband funds are stuck in litigation in New York courtrooms and the US Treasury Dept.

Ken Bensinger writes a suspenseful tale of the investigators, the crooks, and their minions. It has nice thumbnail portraits of the key participants and an interesting update on how one pursues white collar crime on an international scale.

Where it falls down, in my opinion, is context. Five million here, twenty million there. I kept asking myself: what does it all add up to?

How much was taken out of soccer? How much was put into soccer? What is global appetite for pro soccer?

How much is this replicated in other sports — on a local level, on an international level?

Who is implicated in the corporations who paid the bribes including Coca-Cola and Nike? Where are the national players? We only have rumours about how much was paid by Russians and Qataris for the World Cup.

Surely it must be known by now how much was paid out for the 2018 and 2020 World Cups.

There are also some splendid asides that are provocative and could have taken us into some interesting sidebars. For example, Bensinger drops near the end of the tale that the lead prosecutor in the story, Evan Norris, left the dept. for private practise because on his salary he couldn't afford to live in New York. That isn't a small story.

He superficially steps into the lives of some of his characters who began life in poverty, worked up through

the ranks into pro soccer, and capped out their careers as world class thieves.

Rich and poor. In developing countries. In developed countries. It seems like there were many “willing executioners,” the countries who knew about the bribes and played along; the companies who build vast franchises on these events.

From a sanitized western perspective this corruption is shocking; but if you live in Latin America, maybe you see life a little differently. If you’re Sicilian, or Neapolitan maybe corruption is not so surprising.

I kinda wish this book wasn’t rushed to press.

Paul says

Bensinger’s Red Card has everything you could want in a book about scandal: moneyed power brokers who take from poor and give to the rich, strong lawmen and women who strive to right the wrongs, and a satisfying take-down in the end. This book provides a strong vote of confidence for the FBI and law enforcement everywhere. It is an excellent piece of journalism. I also have to note that I have never played a official game of soccer in my life, no youth leagues, no intramurals, no co-ed rec leagues. I don’t even remember the last time I kicked a ball, but I sped through this riveting book in just a couple days.

Thank you to NetGalley, Simon and Schuster, and Mr. Bensinger for the advanced copy for review.

Full review can be found here: <https://paulspicks.blog/2018/04/04/re...>

Please check out all my reviews: <https://paulspicks.blog>

Casey Gattshall says

Very detailed and thorough review of the events leading up to the indictment of several of FIFA’s top officials. The book reads like a thriller and I couldn’t stop turning the pages once I got started. A must read for any soccer fan.

Lance says

I found this book about the investigation and eventual downfall of international soccer's governing body read more like a political and financial thriller than a non-fiction sports book. That isn't to say that I didn't like it - but it was certainly different, in a good way, than what I expected. Ken Bensinger's meticulous attention to detail and his writing style made this book one to enjoy, despite the intense detail and numerous characters. It certainly raised my eyebrows on more than one occasion and now a lot more of the complete picture has come together for why the surprise awards of the 2018 World Cup in Russia and 2022 World Cup in Qatar happened.

I wish to thank Simon and Schuster for providing a copy of the book via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Jon Kaleugher says

If you've ever wondered what has happened to soccer since those arrests (or, if, like my soccer unaware friends didn't even know this was a thing) then look no further (and honestly, if you do you won't find anything else on the subject in print). Told in a concise reporters voice, with a corporate tree and a cast of characters, this book sets off on a journey that will cause you to miss social engagements for a few days. It's engaging and riveting and basically a good ole-fashion-page-turning-white-collar-crime-thriller. I won't spoil the plot, but it's years of investigating by a handful of people of people who have been robbing the sport blind for decades.

Erik Moloney says

The definitive, shocking account of the FIFA scandal—the biggest international corruption case of recent years, spearheaded by US investigators, involving dozens of countries, and implicating nearly every aspect of the world's most popular sport, soccer, including its biggest event, the World Cup.

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Daniel Palevski says

A detailed and at times very entertaining account of the crimes and corruption that ultimately led to the FIFA trials of 2017 in New York.

While exposing a dark underbelly of the international soccer association, Bensinger tells the tale of committed soccer fans, as well as IRS and FBI agents who work tirelessly to expose the hundreds of millions of dollars soccer association kingpins managed to skim from the system and keep from the rightful heirs of

the soccer dynasty.

Hilarious at times, it's hard to believe how so much blatant corruption the bureaucracy of soccer managed to commit.

Luis Reséndiz says

un libro padrísimo para leerse antes del mundial: una investigación profunda, filosa como navaja de afeitar, que abre en dos la historia de corrupción al interior de la fifa y la expone en toda su crudeza: millones de dólares, pagos bajo el agua, arreglos turbios, dinero desviado, cuentas en paraísos fiscales, fiestas obscenas y todo el paquete. un reportaje extenso y potente que mucho tiene de thrilleresco.

Mary says

The author's annoying habit of gratuitously and unnecessarily tossing in physical descriptions of every person he mentions was aggravating to say the least A few of the many examples of what I mean: On page 184 "Hawilla, bald with soft chin, wire rim glasses, and big dark eyes, had been sound asleep..." On page 244 "Bald and stocky, with glasses and a salt-and-pepper beard, Paez had..." On page 283 "With a bald, bulging head, and thick black brows, he began showing off his linguistic dexterity..." (I do wonder about the linguistic dexterity he used his bulging head to display.) However, I must give the author credit for trying to explain all of the complexities involved in the FIFA bribery scandals, which is why I have given him 3 stars.

Keen says

“The story of modern soccer was really about the emergence of a new kind of business, one that turned out to have corruption baked into it nearly from the moment it was born.”

This book proves what many people throughout the world have known for a long time, that the people in charge of FIFA and it's various other associated brands throughout the planet, have been dictated by a group of obnoxious, cheating, liars who have stolen hundreds of millions of dollars from football, money that could have and should have been ploughed back into the game at grassroots level and other worthwhile and needy causes throughout the world.

Anyone who knows even a little about football will be able to tell you that the people in charge of most football associates throughout the world tend to be run by and for an elite group of self-serving businessmen, who are more concerned with career development and the perks of the job, than trying to better the world of football. Traditionally these are often people with little or no experience of playing or even watching the game who come from a totally different world to most football fans, but are drawn to the power and financial opportunities within the game. In short these gentlemen, more often than not, are a bit like the same people you will find in most governments. A glorified criminal network, filled with gangsters out for themselves.

To be fair with this being an US led investigation there is a huge emphasis on CONCACAF and almost

everyone concerned comes from or is based in the Americas. The author builds a nice combination of suspense, intrigue and gradual revelation, slowly pulling away the curtain with that glamorous façade to reveal the real pack of grunting pigs feasting at the trough in the background. The main culprits are all awful in their own ways, but they share many traits such as a profound sense of self-importance, an air of impunity, and an insatiable greed. Not a single one of the main offenders had a career playing football. Though the single guilty woman, Zorana Danis, her father apparently played for the Yugoslavia national team as a goalkeeper.

This is a clandestine tale of ex-spies, Russian oligarchs, kickbacks, and a whole band of corrupt FIFA officials. This is a hidden world of shell companies, SAR's (Suspicious Activity Reports) and 'structuring' or 'smurfing'. Bensinger puts particular focus on several of the big players, like Chuck Blazer who he describes as, "a morbidly obese Jewish New Yorker with a head for business and a shaggy white beard that made him a dead ringer for Santa Claus." Trinidadian Jack Warner, Brazilian Jose Hawilla and Jeffrey Webb from the Cayman Islands, and of course the alleged ringleader, Swiss born Sepp Blatter, showing us that this really was a global operation that stretched its filthy tentacles all across the world..

Warner's many acts, included handing out sealed envelopes stuffed with US dollars, giving each soccer federation of the Caribbean nation \$40'000 in cash at an event in the Port of Spain, otherwise known as bribes. The money had initially come from Mohamed Bin Hammam of Qatar, who was buying the votes from Warner in order to run against Blatter for president. When it was all revealed Bin Hammam was forced to pull out and both he and Warner were suspended, Warner then resigned in June 2011.

"After decades of unchecked impunity in the face of scandals, the global soccer cartel was finally brought to its knees by one of the few countries in the entire world that didn't seem to care much about the sport at all."

Many may wonder why the US government had such a huge interest in bringing down people from FIFA, and it's worth asking if that investigation would have happened had they been granted the 2022 competition?...Many seen this is as the Americans taking yet another opportunity to appoint themselves as the world police and tell the world what is best for it (which funnily enough always coincides with what is best for the US). But then again who else was going to do it?...and how much longer would the world have to wait?...

FIFA has been rife with corruption for decades. You don't need to be a football fan to know that, Qatar being allowed to host the World Cup has just been the final, ludicrous insult in a long, long list. The corporate sponsors were happy to turn a blind eye and so were most of the nations around the world, though places like England being one of the more vociferous and persistent exceptions.

Of the many found guilty and forced to flip to avoid jail, they had to pay vast sums to the US treasury, the Argentinian, Alejandro Burzaco forfeited \$21,694,408.49 but this was nothing compared to the \$151,713,807.43 surrendered by the Brazilian, Jose Hawilla who died in May 2018. This is just a sample of the money gained through their long and arduous investigation; there were tens upon tens of millions more. Apparently this recovered stolen money is now "subject to a restitution hold" and that "any individuals or entities that qualify as victims" could apply for it. In March 2016, FIFA led by the newly elected Infantino, did exactly that, asking for over \$200 million.

At one point Bensinger describes the World Cup as, "a uniquely modern, transnational mass public spectacle for a televised era, blending rampant consumerism, corporate interests, political ambition, and unchecked financial opportunism." Which is as good a description as any. We see that profits were so excessive and record breaking in the four years leading up to 2010, that Blatter was boasting that FIFA had \$1 billion in the

bank and pledged to distribute \$250'000 to each member association as a bonus, plus \$2.5 million to each confederation. But of course times would soon change down the line when in 2015 he would record a loss of \$122 million, followed by a \$369 million loss in 2016.

This is a remarkable story of a long and established culture of profound and widespread corruption. It's thoroughly researched and well written and during it's best moments it can feel a bit like racing through a quality paperback thriller

Putting this book aside and focusing on the investigation itself. It is still an on-going investigation, but looking at the actual outcomes for those found guilty, almost every one (when they didn't die of cancer first) seemed to get off incredibly lightly considering the extent of their crimes. As far as I can see only two or three people had to serve meaningful prison sentences, when the most of the others got away with just paying back the money they stole. In what way does this differ from buying justice?...It seems a very peculiar form of justice. All of the Americans involved seem far too pleased with themselves to acknowledge that they may have named and shamed many of the men from the Americas, got an incredible amount of money back, but as far as I can see that money is still not where it should be and most of the guilty have been handed laughably tame fines and suspensions and are now enjoying their freedom and are free to do it all over again, but maybe in a different sector. The lesson here seems to be, it's OK to be corrupt as long as you've got plenty of money and tell us about the others who were corrupt. You won't need to go to jail. Just pay most of it back, say you are sorry and then we'll put some of the smaller guys in jail instead.

The truth of the matter is that just like the bankers and the politicians these deeply serious criminal offences get labelled as 'white collar crime' and so the only time that anyone is likely to go to jail is that if they are small time players, which is why the only people to serve time so far are unknown figures. It's why the bankers never went to jail and it's why we all know Trump would never end up in jail, because the laws of the land are made by white collars to protect white collars, instead they get named and shamed and fined or banned, nothing as drastic as taking away their liberty, that's for other people, that's for the real criminals.

Athan Tolis says

To stay alive, small business often needs to operate outside the edges of what's legal. And international football used to be small business. So, with the exception of the odd British gentleman here or there, international football used to be run by small time crooks.

And then, suddenly, sponsors arrived, gagging to spend money. The money was lavished on the same small-time crooks, who did not even think of ever changing their ways. Coca Cola and Adidas are credited with starting this dance and Sepp Blatter with ceasing the opportunity. It did not occur to him or to anybody else within his band of crooks that they could do both: get rich and play it straight. Bent was all they knew. Hell, Chuck Blazer, the man in charge of football in the US did not even think of filing his taxes. For seventeen years! In the United States of America...

This type of theft is victimless crime, of course. And it wasn't huge money either, in the bigger scheme of things. Some of Webb's "lavish" parties the author talks about cost less than my wedding. So it ran and ran until it was stopped by... Americans! This is the book about how they did it.

I'll get the good part out of the way first: the author tells the story amazingly well. If you want to know about

corruption in football, it's all here. If you want to know when the corruption took off and how, it's all here. You find out precisely how the small-time crooks used to run football and what they did when it finally rained money. You learn about layering and smurfing and it's ten times more exciting than the compliance test you take once a year at the bank. If you want to find out who Jack Warner is, who Sepp Blatter is and who Chuck Blazer was, you've come to the right place.

The best bit is that this reads like a thriller. If it was all a made-up story, it would still be worth reading. The author is careful not to bombard you with too many names at a time. He builds his characters and helps you see how they evolve. And he writes in a way that forces you to keep reading.

It's also a tremendous book to read if you want to find out how the American justice system works. How a case is built, how the cops ambush the sundry miscreants and "flip" them into ratting on their superiors, all the way to...

Ah, that's the bad part of the story. Sepp Blatter is still free. Oops.

The depressing part of the book is that it reminds you how broken American justice is these days. Armed with RICO and wiretaps and fighting against people who had no idea anybody was watching, crooks with no legal team to fall back on, foreigners who did not avail themselves of their right to counsel, this five-year saga ends with two second-string crooks going to jail and one walking.

Yes, many of the crooks had to pay a decent chunk of money as part of their plea, but pretty much all of them ended up much richer than they started. Some can no longer travel internationally; a couple of them saw their health suffer, but the outcome is depressing. Justice was not served.

Oh, and the only Harvard man in the entire team of prosecutors ends up working at Cravath. Indeed, not a single member of the team who prosecuted the FIFA guys was still involved in the case as it drew to its close, most of them using their role serving you and me as finishing school before their private-sector jobs. It's no wonder we did even worse with the perpetrators of the subprime disaster in '08.

But none of that stuff is author Ken Bensinger's fault. He's done a tremendous job of turning this rounding up of small-time thieves into a thriller.

I'm only cutting him a star because to my taste he sings the FBI's and the IRS's praises a bit too much.

Brian says

Complicated story clearly written. Somewhat of a cross (pun intended) between *Serpico* and *The Big Short*. I am still eager for the World Cup, despite the absence of the U.S. and the existence of this book. Ultimately a downer as corruption unlikely to cease. FIFA would take a giant step forward by pulling 2022 Cup from Qatar, as the only logical reason for it being played there is the bribes.

Steve says

From the idea of an IRS agent in California looking into an American soccer official to a huge

investigation, guilty pleas and trials in 2017 this look into corruption in FIFA was fascinating. The sheer amount of bribe taking was staggering and the egos and personalities involved were larger than life. Like Chuck Blazer who turned his involvement in soccer from soccer dad to multimillions from kickbacks to Jack Webb CONCACAF president elected to clean up the sport who immediately began taking bribes all the way to Sepp Blatter FIFA president. From Trump tower to Miami beach, from Russia to Switzerland, Port of Spain to New York the events in the FIFA scandal span the globe and are shockingly far reaching. This look into the investigation and prosecution of corruption was well researched and written, telling a story more suited to the mafia than a sports association and making many of the organizational decisions of FIFA take on a different light, such as the Russia and Qatar world cup bids.

Erin Schaick says

This was a truly fascinating story and the author did a great job of laying out context and the levels of corruption in many countries and organizations. I'm giving it 3 stars because I listened to this via audiobook and there were simply too many characters and plot lines to keep track of this way. I'd definitely recommend reading this one in print!
