Bensinger, Scott. *Red Card: How the U.S. Blew the Whistle on the World’s Biggest Sports Scandal*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 349 pp.

Reviewed by Jack Ryan

Near end time of the World Cup 2018 final, a mostly tantalizing match between France and Croatia, FOX Sports cut away from the pitch to an executive box. Gianni Infantino, the current International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) President, who was elected during a raucous 2016 session of the FIFA Congress, was signing a commemorative soccer ball. Vladimir Putin, adorned in a white shirt accented with a blazing red tie, sat contentedly next to Infantino. The next time the soccer ball (or a close facsimile) appeared was in Helsinki, Finland, when Putin, fresh off a propaganda coup after successfully hosting the World Cup, handed the ball to Donald Trump, who continued to fail at attempting to conduct political business on the world stage. “I’ll give this ball to you and now the ball is in your court,” said Putin, handing Trump the soccer ball. What Trump, Putin, Infantino, and soccer have to do with each other might not seem obvious; however, as Ken Bensinger, an investigative reporter for *BuzzFeed*, makes abundantly clear in *Red Card: How the U.S. Blew the Whistle on the World’s Biggest Sports Scandal*, soccer has produced a staggering gallery of corrupt characters who would not feel out of place sharing expresso with members of the Gambino family, especially if they were meeting in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, which New Yorkers call “Little Odessa.”

Years before most people had heard of Christopher Steele, the former British spy who compiled the now infamous dossier on Trump and his Russian activities, he was hired by a group of individuals and companies supporting England’s 2018 World Cup bid to gather intelligence on competing bids. According to Bensinger, by early 2010, Steele recognized Putin’s interest in hosting the World Cup, and he shared his information with his British clients and Special Agent Mike Gaeta, head of the FBI’s Eurasian Organized Crime Squad based in New York. Russia, of course, was profoundly unqualified to host the World Cup: the country has no soccer tradition; its team had lost to Slovenia and missed out on the 2010 tournament in South Africa; the country lacked the infrastructure to support the monthlong competition; and, finally, FIFA, the Swiss-based nonprofit that runs the World Cup and world soccer, rated Russia’s bid the riskiest for 2018. Magically, that changed because with people like Chuck Blazer, a seriously overweight guy from Queens who never played soccer yet held the position of General Secretary of the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association of Football (CONCACAF), a FIFA subset, running things from Trump Tower anything was possible. Russia was awarded the 2018 World Cup by a landslide. Bensinger’s book explains how that happened with a propulsive drive well suited for an episodic Netflix adaptation.

Once the odds-on-favorite, England received two votes, one from its own representative. Blazer, who moved CONCACAF’s headquarters to the seventeenth floor of Trump Tower at Trump’s invitation, voted for Russia. As Bensinger notes, Blazer was used to sweet deals. Trump “proposed giving Blazer a year’s rent for free and eleven additional years at half the market rate” (40). How much Russia paid Blazer for his vote has never been completely revealed, but whatever it was it did not go toward paying CONCACAF’s Trump Tower rent. Blazer is only one of the outrageous characters Bensinger presents in this highly readable book. The New York characters could have been created by Jimmy Breslin; the international characters by John Le Carré.

Characters like these, though, cannot stay in the shadows, and one of Bensinger’s good guys, Andrew Jennings, an investigative journalist who fearlessly drew “attention to himself as well as the [FIFA] men he excoriated” (24). Jennings took pleasure in addressing Sepp Blatter, FIFA’s long serving former president, as “Herr Blatter.” Jack Warner, once the FIFA’s Vice President and President of CONCACAF, and perhaps the most corrupt character featured in *Red Card*, ultimately banned Jennings from all FIFA events. Jennings’s blog accounts would be picked up by the mainstream British press and Steve Berryman, the IRS special agent who dedicated himself to uncovering every illegal transaction concocted by this global band of sports profiteers.

Since Maradona’s “hand of God” and the beginning of the “Fair Play” campaign, FIFA had pushed hard for moralism on the field, but not in the luxury boxes across the globe.  The expression “fair play” became a favorite composite noun of the soccer establishment, to the point that the famously corrupt Blatter, upset at boos he received alongside President Dilma Rousseff during the opening ceremony of the 2013 Confederations Cup in Brazil, irritably and ludicrously pleaded with the crowd: “Friends of Brazilian football, where’s the respect, where’s the fair play?” Three years later, Blatter would be banished from the sport because of arrests of his colleagues in North and South America based on information collected by agents of the United States, the heroes of *Red Card*.

Bensinger opens *Red Card* with a FIFA organizational flow chart, a tool that displays how small countries can coalesced voting block power in order to enrich themselves. He also includes a “cast of characters,” which allows his readers to separate the bad guys from the good guys, those going to jail from those escaping jail, and those throwing themselves in front of bullet trains from those who only contemplate suicide. It took investigators years to untangle the FIFA web of deals, bribes, and fraud. In the end, the desire of law enforcement to hunt down all the corrupt officials drove them to successfully conclude the investigation by damaging “the men who had debauched and cheapened the beautiful game for their own selfish ends” (286). Bensinger details this policework and the corruption in fast-moving details that makes it difficult to put this book down. Prosecutorial success, though, has a short shelf life, especially in our present period of lies filling in for the truth. A recent issue of *The New Yorker* reminds us that corruption is a contagion. Sam Knight’s essay, “The Final Whistle: A fan’s revelations about the corruption of soccer are bringing down its most famous teams and the players,” adds a new chapter to the story of soccer’s sleaze. Putin’s soccer ball symbolized the power of money, and as Knight reveals, a “dense intermingling of tactics, feuds, and money” have combined to threaten European soccer. “Money above all” (44). So it goes.

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Knight, Sam. “The Final Whistle: A fan’s revelations about the corruption of soccer are bringing down its most famous teams and the players. *“The New Yorker*, 3 June 2019, p. 44-55.