

# FOOTBALL'S LOST DECADE

Contrary to what Sky TV might have you believe, football did exist before 1992. In fact, the 1980s saw cultural and political change that shaped the modern game. But while football wasn't cool, some of us still loved it. **JON HOWE** looks back with nostalgia at the decade that football forgot...

## A game you might have forgotten

Leeds United 1 Aston Villa 2  
August 16, 1980

**The usual season-opening optimism was somewhat missing from Elland Road in August 1980. Despite the signing of Argentinean Alex Sabella for £400,000 from Sheffield United, Leeds fans were still smarting from a mediocre 11th-place finish the previous season, plus early and humiliating exits from both domestic cups and the UEFA Cup.**

It is safe to say that the words "Adamson out!" were not far from the vocal majority's lips and they would be heard again before this afternoon was out.

A Leeds fan in denial is a dangerous beast, and nobody liked to admit they were watching a club in transition, particularly when the direction of change was heading alarmingly the wrong way. That continued here, despite an explosive start when Brian Flynn earned a penalty in the opening exchanges, which was duly dispatched by Byron Stevenson after 177 seconds. In the searing heat Aston Villa soon wrested control and with punishing authority acted out a footballing lesson which exposed fragile Leeds' vulnerability.

Villa's equaliser came with a sense of acceptance and inevitability on the stroke of half-time, through an impressive solo



Alex Sabella in action against Aston Villa

effort from Tony Morley. The England winger was chief architect again on the hour when striker Gary Shaw bundled in the winner from close range.

While Leeds had opened brightly, the gulf in class was evident, and Villa started a campaign that would see them crowned League Champions with a win more comfortable than the score suggested.

For Leeds it would be meagre fare for much of another fruitless season. Jimmy Adamson was sacked and replaced by Allan Clarke in October, and while "Sniffer" was afforded messiah status, a Goals For total of just 39 goals, by far the worst in the division, told the story as Leeds grimly dug deep for a joyless and insipid ninth-placed finish.

## Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... **Transfer Fees**

Twentieth-century transfer fees progressed steadily as the game developed decade by decade, involving our own groundbreaking transactions involving the sale of John Charles in 1957 (£65,000) and the purchase of Allan Clarke in 1969 (£165,000). However, it was the 1980s that first saw fees rise way beyond inflation, seemingly creating a market existing in its own bubble, reaching the 2009 fee of £80m paid by Real Madrid for Cristiano Ronaldo.

In England, the £1m barrier had already been broken by Trevor Francis' move to Nottingham Forest in 1979. But in 1981 the record British fee grew to £1.5m when Bryan Robson moved from West Brom to Manchester United. Largely bereft of skill but brimming with heart and endeavour, patched-up "Captain Marvel" perhaps epitomised the barren decade where his dislocated shoulder was talked about more than any success on the field.

By the end of the decade Mark Hughes had gone from Manchester United to Barcelona for £2.3m, Ian Rush (below) had transferred from Liverpool to Juventus for £3.2m and Chris Waddle had cost Marseille an astonishing £4.25m.

On the continent the figures were even more fanciful, with Diego Maradona moving to Napoli from Barcelona for £5m and Ruud Gullit joining AC Milan from PSV Eindhoven for £6m.



### Anyone remember... **Byron Stevenson?**

**Our scorer versus Aston Villa had emerged from the junior ranks having signed in September 1973 and was seen as a natural successor to Norman Hunter as a promising centre-half.**

History tells us that he was more of a "Paul Madeley" as he took on a fire-fighting role of plugging gaps in an ever-changing line-up. Stevenson performed competently throughout an unstable period at full-back, centre-half or midfield and was also capped by Wales at full international level.

In 1979 he was involved in an unsavoury incident in an international versus Turkey in Izmir, when an altercation

with a defender lead to a severe and seemingly ad hoc four-year ban from UEFA, a punishment that seemed to define his career.

With Allan Clarke in desperate need of striking options, Stevenson eventually left Leeds in exchange for Frank Worthington of Birmingham in March 1982. The Welshman's career petered out, and he returned to Leeds to involve himself in the pub trade, running – among others – the Golden Lion in Pudsey and the New Inn at Churwell.

Stevenson eventually returned to Wales where he sadly died of throat cancer in 2002, aged only 50.

