

FOOTBALL'S LOST DECADE

Contrary to what Sky might have you believe, football existed 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

April 16, 1983

Leeds United 1 Fulham 1

It was a sign of the rapidly-changing personality of Leeds United that by the end of their first season in the Second Division, after the awakening experience of relegation from the top flight, the mood was less bullish prior to the visit of high-flying Fulham.

Malcolm MacDonald's team were looking odds-on for promotion and while Leeds were in the chasing pack, our nagging inconsistency was the main barrier to any serious promotion push.

By April 1983, Leeds had transformed from a wounded giant expecting to make an immediate return to their rightful place, into a club struggling to come to terms with the financial realities of life. Player-manager Eddie Gray had packed his side with promising youngsters and big names like Frank Worthington and Brian Flynn had been sold.

On a sunny afternoon second-placed Fulham attracted a 24,328 crowd fearing their young side might get a mauling against the division's form team. But in the event Leeds were unlucky not to win.

On the morning of the game new signing Andy Ritchie picked up an injury and 17-year-old rookie Tommy Wright was drafted in for his debut. In a fairy-tale beginning Wright put Leeds ahead early on but despite piling on the pressure a decisive second never came. Wright put in a display way beyond his years, and immediately endeared himself to the Elland Road faithful desperate for new heroes. Exhausted, he was replaced by Neil Aspin late on, and almost immediately Fulham clinically picked up a point when Ray Houghton netted a vital equaliser.

As Leeds' season faded away, it would prove to be a case of critical points lost for the London club as they were pipped to promotion by one point, and in those days there wasn't even the consolation of the Play-Offs.



Eddie Gray



Anyone remember... Tommy Wright?

Famously spotted by club scout John Barr, the man who first recommended Eddie Gray to Leeds United, Tommy Wright was one of the most prominent of the batch of youngsters Leeds were forced to blood as they adjusted to life as a second tier club.

It was Wright's effervescent energy and goals that caught the mood of a disillusioned fan-base searching frantically for a good news story to cling to. Although his goalscoring was never prolific, he was a symbol of a new era and a new generation of fans, and as such his tireless effort and searing pace afforded him patience from a crowd

that was punch-drunk from a calamitous downfall.

Wright forged a special partnership with Andy Ritchie, and later Ian Baird, and provided the width and versatility that the old legs of Lorimer and the Gray brothers couldn't quite offer. Sadly, the arrival of Billy Bremner as manager in 1985 coincided with a year-long stomach muscle injury, and upon Wright's return Bremner was in the process of re-shaping his squad with more experience. Wright was part of the cull and he was sold to Oldham in 1986, before going on to play with Leicester and Middlesbrough.

Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... England Internationals

Okay, some things never change. One aspect of modern-day football was largely mirrored in the 1980s in that England were rubbish.

The decade opened with a sorry display in the 1980 European Championships in Italy as England added little to a dull tournament with low crowds. Indeed, the overriding memory was of Ray Clemence in the England goal overcome by tear gas as police tried to restrain rioting England fans in the game against Belgium, before a crowd of just 15,000 in Turin.

Two years later and injuries to Kevin Keegan and Trevor Brooking put a familiar straitjacket on any hopes we had of progressing in the Spain World Cup of 1982.

Manager Bobby Robson somehow survived not qualifying for the 1984 Euros, but he did regain some national pride as England limped to the quarter-finals of Mexico 1986, before Maradona mixed genius with brass-necked deception in a 2-1 defeat to Argentina.

Robson also survived three straight defeats in the 1988 Euros. This closed a decade best known for big names such as Glenn Hoddle and John Barnes routinely failing to replicate their club form in front of 20,000 crowds at Wembley, as the famous Home Internationals tournament died a slow and lonely death.

