

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

March 13, 1988

Leeds United 5 Sheffield United 0

The 1987/88 season had been an insufferable anti-climax following the enormity of the previous seasons' two-pronged attempt at re-establishing the name of Leeds United.

This 5-0 win offered an isolated moment of conviction as Leeds gathered momentum for an assault on the Play-Off places that would ultimately end in a familiar void of nothingness. It was also a red-letter day for Sheffield-born Wednesday fan John Pearson, an unlikely hero with a 27-minute second-half hat trick.

The Leeds squad was about to undergo yet another major turnover, as Billy Bremner's unsuccessful tenure drew to a close, and only a handful of the players on display would feature regularly a few months later. But on a rain-soaked afternoon of gloriously mud-laden entertainment, that had the often slapstick incompetence of the 1980s written all over it, the fourth-highest crowd in all four divisions of 22,376, revelled in an almost cruel superiority over their local rivals.

Sheffield United were cruising towards relegation, and all the



John Pearson

signs of that were evident – although they battled manfully in the first half with Tony Agana and Peter Beagrie both going close to equalising Peter Swan's close-range opener for Leeds that came after just 80 seconds.

The game really swung in Leeds' favour just before half-time when The Blades' Wally Downes was sent off for two bookable offences, the first of which involved Mark Aizlewood being laid out flat in a challenge that would have had pensioners screaming at the telly had it been World Of Sport wrestling on a Saturday afternoon.

Pearson beat the tireless Ian Baird to a perfect Gary Williams cross to head home the first of his three on 53 minutes, and this opened the floodgates. Six minutes later, John Sheridan, on as sub for the concussed Aizlewood, curled in an exquisite long-range finish to make it 3-0. With the game wrapped up, Pearson heaped misery on the hapless Blades, and doubled his goal tally for the season, by completing his salvo with two strikes in a minute. The Leeds fans in the Kop celebrated with a mixture of joy and incredulity as "Big Bird" hit an unimaginable vein of form.



Mark Aizlewood



John Sheridan

Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... Britain's foreign exports

The 1980s saw a steady flow of high-profile British players leaving their home comforts and seeking fortunes at some of the biggest clubs in Europe.

While the likes of Rooney, Gerrard and Lampard are happy with the obvious attractions of the English Premier League today, in the 1980s the lure of foreign climes tempted almost every star name.

Players such as John Charles, Denis Law, Laurie Cunningham and Kevin Keegan had already carried the flag abroad for British players, but in the 1980s almost any player worth his salt had a stab at the foreign game. Gary Lineker and Mark Hughes went to Barcelona, Chris Waddle to Marseille, Graeme Souness to Sampdoria, Glenn Hoddle to Monaco, Tony Woodcock to Cologne,

while Joe Jordan, Luther Blissett and Ray Wilkins signed for AC Milan. Even Steve Archibald somehow turned up in a Barcelona shirt – honestly.

Ian Rush's famous comment that he failed to settle at Juventus because "it was like another country", perhaps portrays best the fact that as many British stars failed abroad as succeeded.

The fact that so few major players are tempted abroad now probably says as much about the standard of the best home-grown players and the money they can earn in the British game, as it does the attraction of the major European clubs.

Gary Lineker enjoyed a successful spell at Barcelona.



Anyone remember... Peter Swan?

A brute of a man, Peter Swan was a typically fearless old-school footballer, a commodity Leeds United seemed to specialise in during the 1980s. Swan was equally happy to utilise his physical assets in defence or attack but the comparisons with John Charles end abruptly there.

A youth team graduate, Swan's Leeds career was a stop-start affair that featured goals often scored in patches. He never really cemented a regular place, and the fact that as an apprentice Gary Speed once cleaned his boots is probably the most lasting memory.

Leeds-born Swan featured mostly under Billy Bremner, and in the 1987/88 season ended with 10 goals in all competitions from 23 starts, by far his most productive season.

Frustrated at a lack of opportunities under Howard Wilkinson, Swan wanted away. In 1989 he was granted a £200,000 record transfer to Hull City, then managed by Eddie Gray, where he became a popular player.

