

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 28, 1984

Chelsea 5 Leeds United 0

Despite the natural pride and bravado that comes with supporting Leeds United, there are certain results that bring a shuddering reality to proceedings and firmly verify our current standing in the big scheme of things. This was such an occasion.

Eddie Gray was merrily juggling his assortment of experienced pros, shrewd signings and eager youngsters and a fine run of form including four straight wins in February had offered promise. But the inconsistency that dogged Leeds throughout the decade hit home again, as this was followed by no wins in six games over Easter. In the meantime, Chelsea and Sheffield Wednesday had been tearing up the division and this late-April clash saw Leeds' historical nemesis requiring a win to clinch

promotion and the league title. That Chelsea did it in such an emphatic fashion was too much for many Leeds fans to bear, as our own team slumped to a 10th-place finish that brought with it nothing but a reminder of how far we had fallen.

An early Micky Thomas goal started the damage and then a "perfect" Kerry Dixon hat-trick, followed by a late Paul Canoville strike, ensured the Leeds fans would have to stand and stomach their rival's ticker-tape parade. Leeds included in their line-up both David Harvey and Peter Lorimer, who in the previous game had beaten John Charles' all-time Leeds United goalscoring record. But despite their experience of the famous and



David
Harvey



Eddie
Gray

bitterly-fought Leeds-Chelsea rivalry, in the cold reality of 1984 Leeds were swept aside and helpless.

On a sunny day that had seen frequent outbreaks of trouble as soon as the Leeds fans descended on the London Underground, Chelsea's gleeful pitch invasions throughout the game were met with missiles and abuse from the Leeds end.

Unable to tolerate their rivals' success, the Leeds fans took a scaffolding pole to Stamford Bridge's brand new scoreboard and ensured they were probably more talked-about in the next day's papers than the game itself, or indeed, Chelsea's promotion. Suitably appalled, Chelsea's chairman Ken Bates joined in with much of the football world at the time in vowing to get Leeds United kicked out of football.



Peter
Lorimer



Anyone remember... Andy Watson?

In the summer of 1983 I remember seeing a YEP billboard headline proclaiming “Leeds sign Aberdeen star”.

As Aberdeen had recently beaten Real Madrid in the European Cup-Winners’ Cup final I joked to my dad that it might be their best player Gordon Strachan. We chuckled with the knowing amusement that a struggling and impoverished Leeds were a long way from entertaining such fanciful signings – and this was confirmed when we learnt that the player joining us was an unused sub in that final, Andy Watson.

Despite showing grit and a fairly healthy goal return of seven from 36 appearances in midfield, Watson made little impact in an injury-hit first season.

He played seven more times the following season but struggled to adapt to the English game and by December cash-strapped Eddie Gray had decided to utilise emerging youngsters such as Sheridan and Sellars and the moustachioed Watson was sold for £70,000 to Hearts.

Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... **Hooliganism**

If a legitimate process had been found through which to jettison Leeds United completely out of existence as a direct result of their hooligan problems in the 1980s, rest assured it would have been done. It was that serious, and today we may well have been following Farsley FC, or even worse, decorating on a Saturday afternoon instead.

Although several clubs had similar problems, the hooligan element following Leeds United was so numerous and prolific that nationwide blanket abhorrence was an almost weekly event. Local councils, police forces, football administrators, national media and the club’s own chairman had stomached enough of a travelling fan-base tarred as inhuman and beyond hope.

While games at Elland Road were hardly akin to an idyllic skip through lilac fields, almost every away game and any town centre or railway station near them became a battleground for stand-offs, posturing, missiles and sometimes pitched battles. Notable incidents spanned the first half of the decade at West Brom, Grimsby, Barnsley, Sheffield United, Oxford, Birmingham and Odsal, among many, many others, as the landscape was peppered in Leeds’ wake.

A combination of West Yorkshire Police’s Operation Wild Boar, more sophisticated matchday policing, and the club’s efforts in ticket distribution helped to gradually erase the stain on Leeds United’s name.

