

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

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Stoke City 7 Leeds United 2

In an era that saw us lose many one-sided games played out on various mudbaths in the middle of nowhere, you would have thought there would be few more demoralising results than the 6-2 defeat at Stoke in August 1985... But just 12 months after that humiliation, Leeds went back to the Victoria Ground seeking revenge. With the smell of blood in their nostrils the wounded beast returned to the scene of its chastening degradation intent on upholding the honour of the club, and with Revie's general Billy Bremner's words ringing in their ears, promptly lost 7-2.

Okay, Leeds were missing midfield generals Ian Snodin and John Stiles, plus defensive cornerstone Brendan Ormsby. But in a season that incongruously ended with a dramatic promotion push, the result was symptomatic of the erratic away form that kept Leeds from the automatic places for several seasons, not just this one.

Stoke, fielding such stellar names as Brian Talbot and George Berry, plus future George Graham offside-trap-maestros Steve Bould and Lee Dixon, were rampant from the off and Leeds were never in the game from the moment Nicky Morgan bagged the first of an eventual hat-trick on six minutes.

Many would point to being 5-0 down at half-time as the ultimate disgrace, but that honour goes to the fact that one of those goals was a Lee Dixon overhead kick. It was a day where everything that could go wrong, quite spectacularly did, and the embittered Leeds hordes headed off for a Christmas break with only an Ian Baird header and a John Sheridan penalty for solace.

Bremner said he was "ashamed" of the result, and in fairness the club never looked back, with a second half of the season involving a run of form that saw twin FA Cup semi-final and Play-Off final heartbreak.



Anyone remember... Ronnie Robinson?

Sometimes a player's name becomes a by-word for the success or failure of a particular era, and in discussions over the often-wretched mediocrity of the 1980s, the name **Ronnie Robinson** is frequently mentioned in dispatches.



This is mainly born from the fact that Leeds were stuck in a period where their attempts at promotion were akin to a Lada manoeuvring itself from a six-foot pit of quicksand. Gone was the brash post-relegation egotism, and we were yet to feel the rampant optimism of the Wilko era, or even Bremner's resurgent stab in the 1986/87 season.

No, sadly, the mullet-haired Robinson arrived on a free transfer from Ipswich, at a time when free transfers rarely involved sought-after players, and when Leeds supporters' expectations were at rock bottom. He left little to speak of in a Leeds career that amounted to just 27 appearances and resides firmly in the debit column of Bremner's hit-and-miss transfer record. Robinson chalked up 16 appearances at left-back in an unspectacular 1985/86 season. However, by the following campaign Peter Haddock was the preferred left-back choice, and after that the acquisitions of Micky Adams and Bobby McDonald told Robinson everything he needed to know.

Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... Luton's away fan ban

It seems improbable now, but in the 1980s Luton Town were a prominent and influential football club. Not only were they a First Division team with quality players like Brian Stein, Ricky Hill and Mal Donaghy, but they had a pioneering and frankly god-awful plastic pitch, and a – shall we say – outspoken chairman in David Evans.

Following the high-profile disturbances both during and after Luton's 1-0 FA Cup win over Millwall in March 1985, Evans decided to be the trailblazer in the fight against the "football disease" of hooliganism. That he was an aspiring Conservative MP at the time was perhaps a motivation for his very public backing of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's across-the-board stance against football fans, regardless of whether they had committed any crime.

Hence, for the 1986/87 season Luton Town enforced a blanket ban on away fans at Kenilworth Road. Evans was also a vocal supporter of Thatcher's ill-fated ID card system and so imposed his own membership scheme at Luton Town.

He won a seat as a Tory in 1987, and Luton's widely condemned and much-sidestepped away fan ban remained until the 1990/91 season, by which time Thatcher was gone and football was back in favour.

