

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** take one final look back with nostalgia at the decade that football (almost) forgot...

A game you might have forgotten

March 25, 1989

Leeds United 1 Portsmouth 0

On the face of it, a 1-0 end-of-season win against Portsmouth may appear to hold little significance, as yet another season was fading away without a serious promotion challenge being mounted. But upon closer inspection this game, rather than the result itself, was momentous in shaping the dizzying success the club was to achieve over the following three seasons.

Lining up in a Leeds United shirt for the first time this day were 32-year-old Gordon Strachan (a £300,000 signing from Manchester United) and Chris Fairclough (a loanee to the end of the season whereupon a £500,000 fee with Tottenham Hotspur had been agreed).

As statements of intent and transfer deadline moves went, the signings would these days be enough to make Sky TV's Jim White shout incoherently until midnight. Finally Leeds United had made a bold and eye-catching manoeuvre that seemed to wake the club from its slumber.

The signings immediately put 9,000 fans on the average gate, with a crowd of 27,049 turning up

for what was an untidy and bad-tempered game. John Sheridan missed a 12th-minute penalty earned by



John
Sheridan



Chris Fairclough



Gordon
Strachan

and Southampton striker Ian Baird who was central to every altercation on the pitch. This included a second-half clash with Pompey defender Graeme Hogg which resulted in the former Manchester United man seeing red.

It was Baird who settled the game in the 70th minute, but it was a moment fashioned by a typical piece of Strachan ingenuity. Bundled over on the right touchline there were no histrionics from the Scotsman, he simply grabbed the ball off the ball boy and took a quick free-kick to Sheridan. The mercurial Irishman controlled the ball on his chest and whipped a first-time ball to the back post where Baird dived among the boots in textbook fashion to bury the decisive goal. It was a delicious moment in an ordinary game, and it whetted the appetite for what might come from Leeds – though sadly the force of Howard Wilkinson's new broom meant crowd favourite Sheridan wasn't to be part of it.



Anyone remember... Noel Blake?

There were few more intimidating sights on a football field than the muscular Noel Blake bearing down on a lightweight centre-forward, and the Jamaican-born centre-half, dubbed "Bruno" by the Elland Road faithful, was a fast and powerful presence in his short time here.

Brought in by Billy Bremner in for free from Portsmouth in July 1988 at the same time as Vince Hilaire, many felt that the twin transfers were a calculated move by Leeds United, who, riddled by the problem of racism on the terraces, had not signed a high-profile black player since Terry Connor left in 1983.

Blake became a cult favourite in his own right, however, and was virtually ever-present in his first season at the club. Howard Wilkinson used him sparingly in the following season, preferring the Fairclough and Haddock partnership, and Blake was eventually sold to Stoke for £175,000 in February 1990 having cost Leeds nothing just 18 months earlier.

Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... Fanzine culture

The rise of the Football Supporters' Association in the 1980s perfectly reflected the political landscape of free speech and independent spirit. This was demonstrated further by the development of fanzine culture.

Across the British game supporters were finding a voice, and groups of dedicated fans were up all night on typewriters, making enterprising use of the office photocopier and getting busy with the stapler, while spreading humour and tackling the difficult issues.

At Elland Road, opposition players such as Noel Blake had encountered racist abuse in the past, from the famously volatile terraces and National Front newspaper sellers were regularly found on Lowfields Road. The arrival of Blake and Hilaire coincided with the formation of the supporters' group Leeds United Against Racism and Facism. They produced a fanzine called *Marching Altogether* dedicated to fighting the problem. Over time, helped by the involvement of the club and authorities, it worked.

Leeds fans were inspired by the fanzine movement more than most clubs, with the *Hanging Sheep*, *The Peacock*, *Till The World Stops Going Round* and *To Elland Back* all appearing in the late 1980s. They have all been outlasted by *The Square Ball*, however, first printed in 1989 and still giving fans a strong independent voice today.

