

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

May 1, 1989

Leeds United 1 Walsall 0

Let's face it, every now and then there are games at Elland Road when you look around and wonder what the hell you are doing here. Maybe it's a routine, a misguided but unbreakable loyalty, or even simply avoiding a trip to B&Q – but whatever it is we would rather be at Elland Road even if dinner with Piers Morgan appears a more enticing prospect.

One such occasion was this end-of-season kickabout against bottom-of-the-table and already relegated Walsall. After Howard Wilkinson had taken over from Billy Bremner the previous September, Leeds had found themselves as genuine Play-Off

contenders but a familiar loss of composure over Easter, culminating in a 2-1 home defeat to Crystal Palace, had ended any dreams of escape from the club's second-tier drudgery.



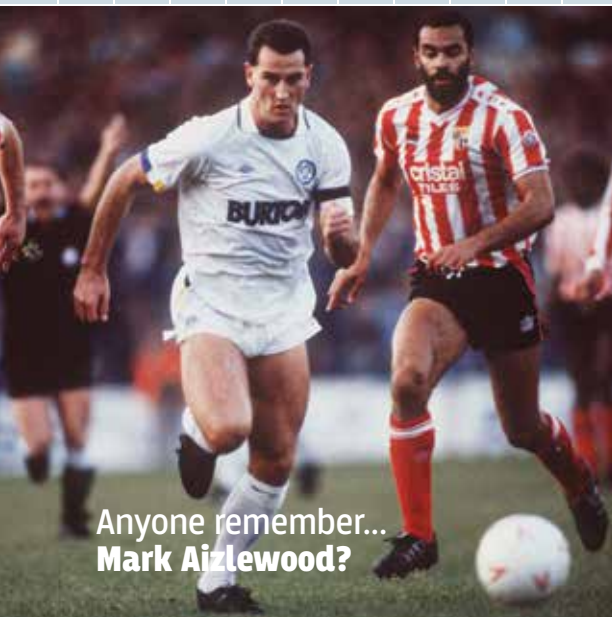
As happened at Hereford in League One (in February 2009) and at Barnsley last season, the fan's spirit, defiance and unrelenting backing of the players finally snapped on this particular sunny afternoon.

Even with the presence of Gordon Strachan, Leeds struggled to make an impact against the condemned Saddlers and were lucky to be level as a frustrated crowd pleaded for the end to another wasted season. At 0-0, late in the second half,

John Sheridan swung in a perfect cross from the right – but captain Mark Aizlewood, six yards out, skewed it into the Kop end much to the crowd's dismay.

Aizlewood had already become a figure of derision with the more vocal members of the crowd as his performances deteriorated throughout the season. With six minutes left, substitute Peter Haddock, somehow finding himself on the right wing, put in another deep cross and this time Aizlewood rose to head it home. The crowd cheered with relief but were instantly silenced by Aizlewood sticking two fingers up to them, on both hands, for several seconds.

Boos immediately rang out as Aizlewood's teammates briskly pulled him away. He turned to blow ironic kisses to the Kop and before the game had restarted, Wilko had replaced him with David Batty. Aizlewood ran straight down the tunnel and was never seen in a Leeds shirt again. Quite a finale, I'll give him that.



Anyone remember... Mark Aizlewood?

Mark Aizlewood arrived at Leeds to some acclaim in February 1987, as manager Billy Bremner looked to add some steel to his midfield. He was cup-tied so missed the run to the FA Cup semi-final but he immediately offered muscle and leadership as Leeds progressed in the league before falling in the Play-Off final to Charlton, the club from which Leeds had bought him for £200,000.

The following season, Aizlewood was made captain. Though he missed much of it through injury, his presence was such that Howard Wilkinson retained him as skipper when he took over, and indeed he won nine Welsh international caps while at the club.

Sadly, as the team's form dipped through the first half of 1989, so did Aizlewood's, culminating in the sorry end to his career against Walsall, from which there was really no coming back. Two months later, to complete his rapid fall from grace, Aizlewood found himself at Bradford City and he now enjoys a *bête noire* status with Leeds fans.

Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... **Poor attendances**

Today, an England international crowd below 70,000 is met with concern and there is nothing more "normal" than going to a football match. But in the 1980s "normal" people had to be protected from football fans – at least that's what the media wanted you to believe.

Such was the violent and humourless stigma attached to football that crowds plummeted across the country. At Leeds, crowds regularly dipped below 10,000 for less meaningful games, and even towards the end of the decade in May 1989, Mark Aizlewood only needed to tell 13,280 to go forth and multiply in the game against Walsall.

In the same season, Manchester United averaged only 36,474 and those dyed-in-the-wool, football-demented Geordies could only average 22,815 in the top division at St James' Park. Indeed, the fallacy that the North East is the hotbed of football was further exposed in the 1986/87 season when Sunderland's average attendance was just 13,600.

It was the same at national level in the 1980s when the Home Internationals died a death with crowds of around 20,000 at Wembley, and the record low crowd for an England international under the Twin Towers was recorded in 1989 when just 15,628 turned up for a Rous Cup game against Chile.

