

# 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 31, 1984

Leeds United 1 Sheffield Wednesday 1

**Inconsistency, infuriated supporters, no money to buy players, inexperienced youngsters left to fight the cause... Yes, this was Leeds United in the 1980s, where "form" and "momentum" were like foreign words.**

The visit of Sheffield Wednesday towards the end of the 1983/84 season brought a team cruising towards promotion under the canny tutelage of one Howard Wilkinson. But his side would leave frustrated by dropping two vital points.

The game saw early appearances for the likes of Wednesday fan Scott Sellars and knock-kneed 18-year-old Denis Irwin. Both excelled in a gritty Leeds performance that showed they could mix it with the best when the mood took them.

Central to that maddening inconsistency was record signing Peter Barnes who had returned from a loan spell at Real Betis and was finally showing glimpses of the crowd-pulling sorcery that tempted Leeds to pawn their best china to fund his signature. A muscular and methodical Wednesday



Peter Barnes (below) and Scott Sellars (right) in action against Sheffield Wednesday.

outfit largely kept Barnes at bay on this occasion but Leeds were worthy of the draw they earned with more than a hint of controversy.

Leeds had enjoyed the better of a tight first half in driving rain and on a pudding of a pitch, with Wednesday making more inroads after the break. When Gary Bannister shot through a crowded penalty area to give Wednesday the lead on 79 minutes, it seemed this game was

following the form book. However, straight from the kick-off Scott Sellars raced down the left wing and put over a perfect centre for Andy Ritchie to head home for a quick-fire equaliser. Few in the ground noticed, but Ritchie had clearly headed the ball onto his arm in the act of scoring, but the referee deemed it was not deliberate.

The game ended all-square, with Wednesday going on to win promotion leaving Leeds treading water in 10th place.



## Anyone remember... Andy Ritchie?

**Although Andy Ritchie was responsible for few standout moments in his Leeds United career he was one of the more reliable performers, and his work-rate, attitude and eye for goal meant he did more than most to keep the good ship Leeds United sailing amid the choppy waters of the 1980s, and perish the thought of what might have been had he not been around.**

Ritchie is perhaps most famous for scoring a hat-trick against Leeds as an emerging starlet at Manchester United, but he failed to succeed at Old Trafford and moved to Brighton. Leeds captured him in 1983 in a surprise swap deal with our local hero Terry Connor.

Much of Ritchie's Leeds career was spent as an attacking midfielder, and the 40 goals he contributed made him a popular player among an ever-changing squad. Sadly, his stint at Leeds was played out against the backdrop of a contract dispute and he played the whole of the 1986/87 season, possibly his best, on a month-by-month contract. Finally, he moved to Oldham when the dispute couldn't be resolved.

A promising managerial and coaching career led to Ritchie becoming Leeds' Academy Director in 2001 before being bombed out by Peter Reid in 2003. Ritchie now works in the media.

## Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... Apathetic TV coverage

**Given Sky Sports' lucrative dictatorship of modern football it is hard to believe that the game once faced a media blackout, as an indifferent nation appeared happy with just two or three live games a season.**

Local and national highlights programmes such as *Match Of The Day*, *The Big Match*, *Sportsnight* and *Midweek Sports Special* were still popular in the 1980s, although unbelievably, a contract dispute in 1985 meant that during the 1985/86 season there were no recorded highlights of any games for six months. Imagine that now! Football's pariah-status extended to the scores not even being read out on the Saturday evening news, and England games had none of the social significance they do now.

The 1980s also saw the odd phenomenon of ITV only showing the second half of England games live. Hence, while John Barnes was waltzing through Brazil's defence to score one of the most famous England goals of all-time in 1984, the nation endured the grating whines of Cilla Black in *Surprise, Surprise*.

Live football was introduced by ITV on October 2, 1983 when Tottenham faced Nottingham Forest for the first ever televised league game. ITV paid just £5.2m to secure what 30 years later cost Sky over £3bn.



BBC Match of the Day  
host Jimmy Hill