

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

October 7, 1989

West Ham United 0 Leeds United 1

By the end of the decade many Leeds fans had been stung too many times to fully buy into the optimism surrounding the raft of big-name signings the club had made in the summer of 1989. Likewise, Leeds were not the red-hot favourites in the press either, until a little-celebrated but psychologically important landmark victory propelled them into the media spotlight.

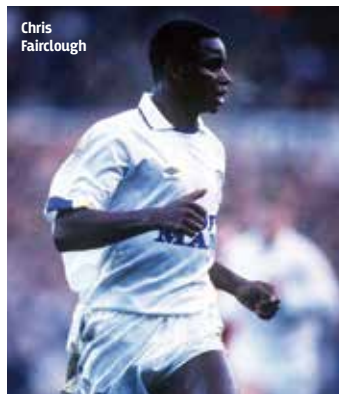
With England preparing for a World Cup qualifying showdown with Poland, all First Division games had been postponed. Hence the London press descended on Upton Park for the game of the day, heavily-laden with a match report seemingly already half-written and dripping in cliché and stereotype.

What transpired was a match that did little to inspire anything but the strengthening of those preconceptions. With the calculating execution of a rigid and uninspiring gameplan, Leeds won the game 1-0, and the media went to town on how the brutal northern thuggery moulded from Revie's great but demonised team, had upset the football purism from the game's "academy" at Upton Park.

That West Ham's side contained such anti-football henchmen as Julian Dicks, Tony Gale and Alvin Martin was lost among the capital love-in, as was the

fact that the Hammers had three men booked to Leeds' none. Still, the lazy journalism was dispatched to print almost as nonchalantly as Vinnie Jones 22nd-minute winner, as he swept home a low Mike Whitlow cross in front of the massive 5,000-strong away following.

Chris Fairclough was a colossus in defence for Leeds, with him and his sidekick Peter Haddock patrolling the halfway line to continually engineer an offside trap honed with military precision. It was a professional performance which won few plaudits, but instilled a renewed belief in the team and the fans and ended a London hoodoo that had hamstrung Leeds for many years.



Chris Fairclough



Vinnie Jones

Anyone remember... Mike Whitlow?

Few players advertise the Howard Wilkinson school of management better than Mike Whitlow, a solid yet ordinary player (meant in the nicest possible way) plucked from non-league obscurity and schooled into an over-performing nugget who would help himself to a League Championship medal. It was the stuff of dreams that would never happen today, but Whitlow knew his place and made the most of it while it lasted.

Whitlow was rejected by Bolton Wanderers in 1985 and began playing part-time with Witton Albion. Wilkinson was alerted to Whitlow and his team-mate Neil Parsley and they joined Leeds in a joint deal, having previously been linked to Wilkinson when he was at Sheffield Wednesday.

Versatility was a "given" in most Wilkinson players, and Whitlow had it; performing to the same standard at left-back, centre-half or left-midfield. He would become a valuable squad member over his four years at the club, particularly in the troublesome left-back slot prior to the arrival of Tony Dorigo. Whitlow is best remembered for his glancing header in the 6-1 demolition of Sheffield Wednesday in the 1992 title-winning campaign, one of his last acts in a Leeds shirt before he was transferred to Leicester City in March 1992.



Nothing happened in the 1980s, apart from... Terracing

For years football fans had stood on terraces with little regard for their well-being. As fans became more tribal and volatile they were herded like cattle into segregated pens, and the act of celebrating a goal changed from politely clapping and cheering to a mass orgy of arms and legs; a roaring sea of madness in which you had very little control over your eventual whereabouts.

We all loved it. It was fun, it was freedom, it was all we had ever known. There was no thought that the occasional discomfort we felt could ever lead to something serious. Sitting down was something you did at the cinema. Being offered the basic human right to enjoy a form of entertainment without fear of any bodily harm was a foreign concept to football fans.

Regardless of a series of disasters such as at Ibrox in 1971, and near-fatalities at Elland Road in the record-gate FA Cup tie versus Sunderland in 1967, football fans were merrily and archaically shoe-horned onto terraces in as great a number as was physically possible. But no one realised that terraces were not the problem, more the sheer number of people squeezed onto them. Reducing this after Hillsborough was too late, the fun was over.

