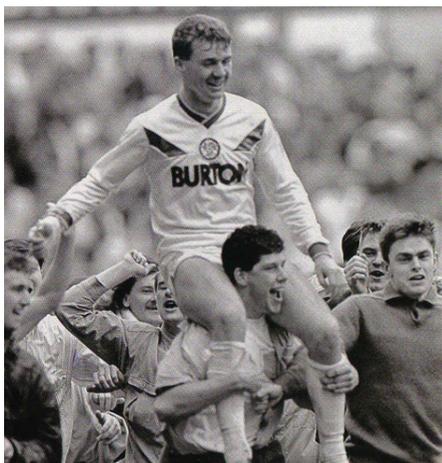


DEFEATISM BEGINS AT HOME

by Jon Howe

Avoiding flying seats, being herded into and out of pens with eight foot-high spiked fencing, exposed to the cold whistling around the empty segregation of the rest of the concrete and corrugated iron ground, pissing in toilet blocks that have been smashed to pieces, town centre and rail station confrontations, crumbling terraces, grass banks, fans standing on the roof, climbing floodlight pylons, surges and crushes literally squeezing the life out of you. We all remember the 80s, right? When keepers didn't need gloves, when we didn't know who would win the league, when players showed loyalty to the club, when dogs ran on the pitch, and when we didn't feel exploited.



Reading the discourse of and speaking to Leeds fans as regularly as I do, the one recurring theme that comes up is 'The 80s'. At times it seems there are just two types of Leeds fan: those that remember the 80s and those that don't. While the billion pound industry of modern football, with 24/7 slick graphics, model presenters, goal music and preposterously wealthy teenagers, may wish to pretend that the 80s never existed, even The FA can't erase a decade from history, much as they'd like to.

On the outside, for Leeds United, yes, 'The 80s' were for the most part something to forget, but on the inside, those fans that lived through it largely remember otherwise. It was an almost

mythical time that people of a certain age speak of, and we need to detach and isolate it by putting it in inverted commas. Life was different then: we had no pressures, no obstacles, no responsibilities, sufficient disposable income and seemingly endless disposable time.

What is difficult for younger people to appreciate today is that in the 80s football wasn't fashionable. We didn't have pull-out sections in the papers dedicated to every last detail of every football

women and children were present but I can't actually remember. The whole of Elland Road, and particularly away matches, just seemed to be a sea of people your age, with your spirit and your outlook on life; and life was great. I was a teenager in the 80s and Elland Road was quite a place to grow up. It may have been a time that historians would prefer to expunge from the record books, but for me I wouldn't change a thing (though of course women and children are now welcome...).

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league in Europe, we had a couple of pages at the back talking about England and whoever lead the First Division. We didn't have Sky Sports News, we had Teletext and Clubcall. TV wasn't hugely interested in football, and even highlights shows were stopped for a couple of seasons due to some industrial dispute I can't even recall the nature of. We didn't have sell-out flat-pack stadiums with restaurant-seating in concourses and season ticket waiting lists with interest-free options; we had 12,000 gates, which were considered healthy against the national average.

Football fans were different too, or the demographic was. There were no jester hats or replica shirts, no pre-match family meal deals, no girlfriends in England merchandise joining their mates to watch the European Championships (NOT the 'Euros') in pubs. Football fans were scum in 'The 80s': we were all tarred with the same brush. Leeds fans were even lower than that. People crossed the street to avoid you, nobody engaged in conversation about football because all football fans were 'hooligans', and sub-human Leeds fans could barely talk anyway, remember?

Leeds United matches were a purely male domain, or at least they seemed to be. I am quite sure

Whatever era you grow up in, whenever you start going independently to football games, when you start to live it, week-in, week-out, when it grips you and consumes you, takes up all your time and money and is all you and your mates talk about: that is the era that will forever be the best and worst of times for you. You feel the highs and lows more poignantly, it carries you along and you can't stop it; the numbing pain, the elation that leaves you shaking, the breathless exhilaration.

For most people these are the teenage years, but I guess some come to this stage slightly later in life, like most Arsenal fans at the Emirates for example, because football wasn't fashionable when they were teenagers: they were the 'Dungeons and Dragons Years'. I find it hard to imagine but I guess for some, those teenage years of highs and lows are now. They're living it now. Now is the time they are setting off on a journey they'll never come back from, taking in all points on the compass, seeing things they will never believe, experiencing pain they never imagined, and the wholesome camaraderie and tribal brotherhood that stays with you forever. In short, for some, 'The 80s' are now. And this brings me to my point.



'The 80s' are generally held up as the darkest period in Leeds United's existence. We had just been relegated, having scaled the heights of Europe only seven years previously; we had to sell the ground to the council because we couldn't afford to maintain it; we had to sell all our big names and blood youngsters who weren't accustomed to playing in front of baying mobs, banks of policing, pitch invasions and a hail of missiles. Leeds United were the lowest of the low. The Police, The FA, Ken Bates, anyone in the street who watched the news or read the papers: they all wanted Leeds United banned from existence.

The results were just as grim. It took eight, long years to escape the second tier and in between times we had to endure godforsaken performances by godforsaken players at godforsaken outposts of the football map that have since been bulldozed. But were they any worse than the performances teenage fans are experiencing today? The best and worst of times? Casting aside the unique political and social landscape of 'The 80s', which made the football-watching adventure something that could never be replicated nor considered in relative terms to today's plastic and sterile 'matchday experience', was the football itself any worse than what we are watching today?

Are the 'worst' times of my teenage years actually as bad as I remember? Were they as bad as losing 6-4 at home to Preston having been 4-1 up, or 7-3 to Forest? Or 4-0 to Birmingham, or 5-0 to Blackpool, also both at home? Did we have a Danny Webber or a Danny Pugh, a Darren O'Dea or a Paul Connolly? I walked home after the Forest defeat wondering if these, and not 'The 80s' I remember, are my worst times. League One was diabolical of course, but there was black humour amongst it all and it stands in isolation, the severity of our plight put it in a different context. Now we should be getting better: we thought we had escaped the bad times, we should be on our way back. We shouldn't be shipping seven goals... at home.

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Looking back, we all remember the defeats in 'The 80s'. The 1981/82 relegation season opened up with a 5-1 defeat at Swansea, closely followed by a sprinkling of 4-0s at Coventry, Man City and Southampton. We didn't get tanked once in our first season in Division Two, 1982/83, but the following season saw the infamous 5-1 at Shrewsbury, a 4-1 at Oxford, a 4-2 in the Cup at Scunthorpe and the notorious 5-0 at Chelsea. 1984/85 brought us a 5-2 defeat at Oxford and the following season brought us the 6-2 at Stoke and a couple of 4-0s at Charlton and Norwich. Many people forget that Bremner's epic 86/87 season was punctuated by the 7-2 at Stoke, and the following season saw the bizarre 6-3 at Plymouth. The beginning of the end for Billy was a 4-0 defeat at Portsmouth in September 1988, and even the promotion season started with a 5-2 at Newcastle.



Certainly a tale of woe, and a litany of horror shows that will trigger lonely, head-in-hands memories to the soundtrack of police sirens and opposition fans' goading, for all who witnessed them. But do you notice anything? Is there a pattern forming here that has escaped attention whilst we reminisce of Ellesse trainers, Farah's, Pringle sweaters and Patrick cagoules? All those crushing, soul-destroying defeats that shamed the club and dragged its name further into the mire as a permanent record of our abhorrent mediocrity, were all away from Elland

Road. They all occurred in half empty stadiums, on quagmire pitches, far from the comfort and belonging of our home fortress.

'The 80s' opened with a 5-0 home defeat to Arsenal in November 1980, in which John Lukic made one of his lesser-known gaffs, but after that we were never truly humbled once at home. We may have been watching the painfully limited talents of Ronnie Robinson or Brian Caswell, but they held our name at Elland Road. They fought our corner and made sure that 'Elland Road', the home of Leeds United, maintained some respect and notoriety.

Bar a 4-0 defeat to then First Division Watford (Barnes, Blissett, et al) in the League Cup in 1984/85 we never skulked away hurriedly from our Mecca with hunched shoulders and a shamed visage. We barely ever conceded more than two goals. In fact in the nine seasons after that 5-0 drubbing from Arsenal we only conceded three or more goals at Elland Road on twelve occasions, and four of those were 3-3 draws and another was the 4-3 win over Hull City in 89/90. The heaviest league defeats were three 3-1's and a 4-2 to Ipswich in 88/89.

So while the likes of Jack Ashurst, Gary Williams, John Stiles, Tony Brown and John Donnolly might be fabled figures of ridicule, synonymous with our darkest hour, were they actually any worse than Fede Bessone, Alex Bruce, Mikael Forssell or Mika Vayrynen? The statistics suggest not.

The best and the worst of times; they stick with you forever and they cloud your judgement. I'm happy 'The 80s' were mine and I'm sorry for anybody who didn't witness them. They will always be equally great and horrible in my mind, but time teaches us to be selective.