

WIGAN - LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

I read somewhere that the St Helens - Wigan rivalry was rated the third most intense in sport - whether that was world or British, I can't quite remember - and that this was remarkable given that it involved two relatively small towns tucked away in south Lancashire.

Third most intense? I imagine most supporters here today would take issue with that disappointingly low ranking.

Despite what our friends in Leeds and Bradford - and perhaps even Hull - might claim, this derby is the big one, and with over 40 years of watching these matches behind me, I should know.

My first derby match was neither at Knowsley Road nor the late, lamented Central Park, but at Wembley in 1966 when, unbeknown to me, Saints allegedly exploited a loophole in the rules and slaughtered the old enemy. I remember sitting with my Dad on the very back row of the stadium and, as a nine year old, being overwhelmed by the enormity of the place. "Murphy, Murphy," went the roar. Little did we realise he would soon disappear down the East Lincs to a mysterious town I scarcely knew.

My first derby at Knowsley Road was in September 1968 when Saints won a Lancashire Cup tie 19-16, and it was particularly good to see Austin Rhodes, who lived in our cul de sac, scoring two of the Saints tries. Then, on Boxing Day 1968, it was finally decreed that I was old enough to cope with the big crowd, and off we went to my first festive fixture.

It ended in huge disappointment as, on a frosty afternoon, the match was abandoned just before half time with Saints comfortably in the lead. Was it wrong to start in the first place? Just how bad were conditions underfoot? Questions were asked as home supporters made an early start for home, while Wiganers, no doubt smirking, wended their way over Billinge Hill.

On Boxing Day the following year we tried again, and my first trip to Central Park looked as if it were going to turn sour as Wigan scored before Saints had touched the ball. 80 minutes later, with eleven Saints tries on the board, Wigan had suffered their worst ever defeat. Midway through the first half, I asked "Dad, why are so many Wigan supporters going home so soon?"

I've seen so many Saints v Wigan games over the years that it's almost impossible to pick out the best, or most memorable. Selective memory, otherwise known as sporting amnesia, comes into play, of course. We have suffered some defeats against our nearest and dearest, but, somehow, I can't remember anything about them.

How do the following games rank along yours as the most memorable derby matches?

In 1971 we met at Swinton in the Championship Final. With seven minutes left Wigan were winning 12 - 6 and Saints had had John Mantle sent off, but "the greatest comeback since Lazarus" (in the days before we did great comebacks) saw Saints take the trophy. Was Billy Benyon offside for the winning try? What do the record books say?

In 1984 we met at Central Park in the Lancashire Cup final, having lost the toss for venue. Big Mal was in our ranks, while Wigan had a young man called Shaun Edwards making his way in the game. He would go on to do quite well, but this game won't live long in his memory. It does in mine, though, as I jumped the wall at the end and ran round with the cup in the company of such heroes as Mal, Harry Pinner and Peter Gorley.

On Boxing Day 1987 the half time situation at Central Park was hopeless - but again, Lazarus would have been proud. From being 22-6 down, Saints recovered to win 32-22.

And then, in June 2005 in the quarter final of the Challenge Cup....

Enough! There may be Wiganers reading this.

Let's hope for a good game today.