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In 1919, the Football League First Division was to be expanded from twenty clubs to twenty-two in time for the 1919–20 Football League: Forest was one of eight clubs to campaign for entry, but received only three votes. Arsenal and Chelsea gained the two additional top tier slots.[10]

Brian Clough became manager of Forest on 6 January 1975, twelve weeks after the end of his 44-day tenure as manager of Leeds United.[14] Clough brought Jimmy Gordon to be his club trainer, as Gordon had been for him at Derby County and Leeds.[15] Scottish centre-forward Neil Martin scored the only goal in Clough's first game in charge, beating Tottenham Hotspur in an FA Cup third round replay.[16]

Anderlecht beat Forest in the 1983–84 UEFA Cup semi-finals in controversial circumstances. Several contentious refereeing decisions went against Forest. Over a decade later, it emerged that before the match, referee Emilio Guruceta Muro had received a £27,000 "loan" from Anderlecht's chairman Constant Vanden Stock.[51] Anderlecht went unpunished until 1997, when UEFA banned the club from European competitions for one year. Guruceta Muro died in a car crash in 1987.[52]

Forest beat Everton 4–3 after extra time in the 1989 Full Members Cup final, then came back to beat Luton Town 3–1 in the 1989 Football League Cup Final. This set Forest up for a unique treble of domestic cup wins, but tragedy struck a week after the League Cup win. Forest and Liverpool met for the second season in a row in the FA Cup semi-finals. The Hillsborough disaster claimed the lives of 97 Liverpool fans. The match was abandoned after six minutes. When the emotional replay took place, Forest struggled as Liverpool won 3–1. Despite these trophy wins, and a third-place finish in the First Division, Forest were unable to compete in the UEFA Cup, as English clubs were still banned from European competitions following the Heysel Stadium Disaster. Des Walker won the first of his four successive elections for the PFA Team of the Year.

Forest chairman Nicholas Randall had initially promised that Forest planned to return to playing European football within five seasons, and yet poor transfers and a toxic club culture meant that Forest remained in the Championship four years into the Marinakis era.[122] In the summer of 2024, structural changes were made at the club to try and correct the previous mistakes. Forest appointed Dane Murphy as Chief Executive, and George Syrianos was brought in as head of recruitment to bring about a more analytics