

126th Year 1997-8

Amid the celebrations that followed Exeter's promotion to the second tier, there came a realistic appraisal of the club's situation from Director of Rugby, Bob Staddon. When interviewed by John Mason of the Daily Telegraph he said "We must think carefully about how we conduct the club's business in future. We're not a professional club in contemporary terms. Exeter has no contracted players or coach. The paid staff comprise chief executive, commercial manager and some assistance in the office. The players have a match fee and even with a small bonus system, none could possibly afford to give up a day job. We're still very amateur".

The club optimists no doubt felt justified by the opening league fixture, away at Wakefield, which was won by means of a Mark Woodman try and fourteen points from the boot of Jon Fabian (19-15), but the reality of playing second tier rugby against clubs with greater financial resources became evident in the following two games. At Coventry, the same pair scored Exeter's points but this time the home club finished over twenty points ahead (8-29). The first home game of the season saw opponents, Bedford, score over thirty points. Exeter errors led to scoring opportunities for the visitors that were eagerly taken. Exeter did play well in patches but, as reported in the Western Morning News, the team would "need to acquire a mean streak a mile wide if they are to cope with life in the big league" (17-32).

The following week at the County Ground, it was an error by Waterloo that gave Exeter a second victory of the season. The visitors led by a six point margin at the break but a fight back by Exeter saw the home side in the lead by four points with ten minutes left to play. Late in the game a visiting centre lost possession as he stretched to touch down what could have been a winning try. Jon Fabian scored two tries from the full-back position and contributed twenty-one points in all (24-20).

Two consecutive defeats by a single point – away at Moseley (22-23) and at home to West Hartlepool (19-20) – would have resulted in mixed feelings of both frustration and hope but they began a run of seven consecutive league defeats. Exeter lost away to fellow strugglers Fylde (10-18) and then lost at home to London Scottish (16-22).

On their home ground Waterloo more than made amends for their defeat at the County Ground. Racing into an early ten point lead the home team continued to apply pressure, and finished by scoring nineteen unanswered points in the last quarter of the game (13-44).

On the 1st of November the league season was interrupted by the third round of the Tetley's Bitter Cup in which Exeter had been drawn away to National Division Two South team, Barking. The Essex club, bolstered by recruits from the newly reorganised Saracen outfit, came close to a giant-killing performance. They matched Exeter try for try and had all their attempts at goal been successful they would have won. Exeter stuck to their task and as Michael Alwyn wrote in The Times "Both teams are quietly and efficiently picking their way through the minefield of professional rugby" (17-13).

A home league encounter against Moseley ended in defeat (10-20) before a new competition entered the rugby scene. The Cheltenham & Gloucester Cup saw clubs in the top divisions drawn into pools of four teams, the winners of each pool then proceeded into the play-off stages. The first pool game involved Exeter playing at home against Orrell. When four points in the lead with a quarter of an hour to play, the visitors spurned a simple penalty chance. Exeter then scored a try and conversion to take the lead. With the last kick of the game Orrell could have levelled the scores but it missed the target. Fly-half Fari Tchahardehi scored all Exeter's points (23-20). The next two pool games ended in heavy defeats – at Rotherham (22-55) and at home to Premiership side Leicester (20-50).

Attention then returned to the league but a seventh successive defeat came at West Hartlepool (14-34). The losing spell was finally broken when Fylde came to the County Ground. Fourteen points

from the boot of Jon Fabian and tries from James Avis and Mark Curry afforded some relief for staff and supporters just before Christmas (24-15).

The first game of the New Year found the team travelling to Newcastle for a fourth round tie of the Tetley's Bitter Cup. The flight from Exeter in a Force 9 gale caused several players to be ill on the aircraft. The home side, leaders of the Premier Division at the time, paid Exeter the compliment of fielding six international players. Conditions at Kingston Park were "horrendous" according to Alasdair Reid of the Sunday Times who said of Exeter "their bravery and spirit was immense". Newcastle contrived to score six tries to a single effort by Exeter scored by Richard Baxter following a ruck close to the home side try line (10-34).

A fortnight later, Exeter achieved a precious victory defeating Coventry at the County Ground with James Alvis and Richard Baxter again scoring tries (18-14). Defeat returned at London Scottish (10-22) before another league win was achieved at home against Blackheath (20-18). The try scorers were again Alvis and the younger Baxter brother,

For the last Cheltenham & Gloucester Cup game Exeter travelled to Sunbury to face a below strength London Irish side. A local report stated "Exeter never gave up and were in with a chance until the very last moments of a somewhat lacklustre game" (25-27).

A first encounter with Orrell in a Division 2 game found visitors Exeter struggling. A 31 point blitz in a twenty minute period either side of the interval by the home team quashed any Exeter hopes of victory (3-38). Then after a two week break Exeter suffered an unusually heavy home defeat at the hands of Rotherham (8-33). Fortunately this trend did not continue when Orrell came for the return league fixture. The visitors took an early lead with a penalty but "a rampaging and committed Exeter pack" carried the day. Trailing by eleven points at one stage, the Lancastrian side pulled up to within three points but poor handing let them down at the close (17-14).

The victory over Orrell represented Exeter's final win of the season. Defeat at Blackheath (15-26) preceded a disappointing home game against fellow strugglers Wakefield who thereby avenged an opening day defeat (17-30). Two further games, both played away, witnessed the final two defeats – against Bedford (3-16) and Rotherham (27-50).

The final league table showed Exeter in 11th place, equal on 12 points with Wakefield but with an inferior points difference. Only Fylde stood below them. However, due to another league structure re-organisation both Exeter and Fylde avoided relegation. They remained in Premiership Two and were joined by four teams promoted from the lower league. For the 1998-9 Premiership Two would consist of fourteen teams, each playing 26 games.