

65th Year 1936-7

Three different versions of the playing record for this season were published - one by the club at its Annual General Meeting, another by the local press at the end of April and the third in the Rugby Football Annual. The differences between these records appear to revolve around the status of matches played against Blundell's Squirrels early in the New Year and against North Tawton at the start of April. The results of these two games were not included in what must be regarded as the official club record which was presented as eighteen victories and five draws from a programme of 38 matches played.

The performances of the first fifteen showed a distinct improvement compared to the record of the previous season. A stronger fixture list made the record even more impressive. "Very satisfying" was the verdict of President William Ashford when presenting the Annual Report. The club's junior teams also performed very well during the season.

The captain was Philip Paul a regular try scoring winger who served the club well both on and off the field for many years. Showing the strength of Devon rugby at the time, he was never capped by his county. Second in command was H.R. (Harry) Pape an Exeter born product of All Hallows School who went on to play both rugby and cricket for Devon. Master of the Silvertown Foxhounds and Stoke Hill Beagles, Harry Pape had many interests. At the end of November he resigned his official position with the rugby club but continued to play regularly. In his place E.P. (Percy) Thomas was elected as vice-captain and pack leader although he had announced his retirement the previous season due to business commitments.

After the usual practice matches that included the Chiefs beating the 2nd XV (26-0) the opening game was an away meeting with Plymouth Albion who by this time had already played two senior matches. A post-match headline read "Exeter will surprise many teams this season" but in the end it was "Exeter's lack of staying power" that cost them the game. A try in last two minutes saved Albion's blushes. Both teams scored two tries but a dropped goal by the home team beat a conversion to make the difference between the scores (8-10).

A home game against Newton Abbot started scrappily with the backs missing chances before Exeter recovered to score five tries, three of which were touched down by winger Fred Job (17-0). A mid-week game at Sidmouth found Exeter weak at centre-three-quarter again. The home team won the honours in a fast game (6-9). Another away game followed this time at Torquay Athletic. For this match it was the Exeter pack that proved to be the weakness being beaten in both tight and loose play. The backs however had improved but even so Exeter was deemed to be lucky in gaining victory. W.E. (Bill) Sprake, a recruit from Honiton, scored fourteen points and captain Phil Paul scored the winning try near the end of the match. For the home team, playing one short in the second half due to an injury, it was their first defeat of the season (17-14).

For the first match in October Exeter travelled to Bridgend with what was described as a fully representative XV. Despite putting up a spirited display the visitors were outplayed by the club that was the highest scoring in Wales at the time. Although Exeter's forwards impressed the team conceded five tries and scored only one. According to the Western Mail, Bridgend, in front of 1,500 supporters, "were fully entitled to the honours" (3-23).

In compensation Exeter then proceeded to win the next five games. At home to Paignton in ideal conditions Exeter played in "subdued fashion" but Phil Paul crossed for three tries (14-

3). A thousand spectators turned up at Exmouth to see their team beaten at home for the first time in the season. Exeter was clearly the better team (11-0).

Returning to the County Ground the next week Exeter was weakened by county calls. Although Devonport Services was similarly affected Exeter's largest crowd of the season witnessed a vigorous game in which the home backs proved superior (13-4).

After a bout of first half mishandling Exeter went on to score eighteen points in twenty minutes during the second period of their home game against Woodford. Fred Job was given the accolade "man of the match" whilst skipper Phil Paul dropped a goal and added a conversion to his brother Colin's try (18-5). Finally in this sequence Clifton came to visit in wet and windy conditions. The visitors' forwards initially held sway but the Exeter pack managed to score three tries from loose rushes (12-0).

The run of successes came to an end at Cheltenham where the home club was defending its ground record. The match was described by the Gloucester Echo as being "stirring and spectacular" and a "sporting exhibition". The Exeter players may not have agreed with these observations as later events revealed. The visitors already lacking three county players were further weakened when Bill Sprake broke a bone in his foot mid-way through the first half. Cheltenham's winning score came in the final minute (6-11).

Exeter then lost its home record to Plymouth Albion in a close game. Another last minute score, similar to that in the early season encounter between these teams, ended Exeter's hope of success (11-13). Exeter recovered winning ways at home with a defeat of Torquay Athletic thereby registering a double over their south Devon rivals. Despite fielding what was said to be a weakened side Exeter found themselves ten points up in as many minutes. A final try was scored by Colin Paul who played with "a poisoned arm" (15-0).

December was a quiet month as far as fixtures were concerned with only three games scheduled. Exeter was expected to take the ground record of Taunton but an early try gave impetus to the home team who went on to win (3-13). A blank Saturday due to a Devon match on the County Ground followed.

Cheltenham arrived by motor coach twenty minutes late for the return match. Both teams were under-strength and it was Cheltenham who squeezed a narrow victory (0-3). Near the end of the match "a series of unpleasant incidents" when tempers frayed resulted in an Exeter player being knocked-out. The visiting scrum-half was then sent off. This was followed by a demonstration by spectators at the end of the game. Early the following week Exeter announced that fixtures with Cheltenham would be dropped because of rough play.

The now regular Boxing Day game against Exmouth took place in front of about 1,200 spectators on the seashiders' ground. J. Sanders, one of the Exeter forwards was removed to hospital with a dislocated shoulder but the visitors held out for a draw (3-3).

The New Year began with the team playing well enough to win but "unaccountable defensive lapses" led to defeat at home by Teignmouth (3-9). A mid-week win against Blundell's Squirrels in what was likely to have been regarded as an unofficial fixture saw Exeter revelling in the mud at the County Ground scoring seven tries to one (23-6).

At The Rectory a much heavier Devonport Services pack put paid to Exeter's chances (0-8) but then followed a comfortable win over local rivals Exmouth (12-5). At home to Taunton

the muddy ground with standing pools of water dictated the tactics though Exeter did initially try handling movements in the first half. Dribbling by the pack was the order of the second half which led to two tries scored by scrum-half Dick Madge (6-0). Reappearing in the team for the next month was Ken Wreford who had left for Bristol in 1934.

A trip to Cornwall to face Redruth found Exeter having to contend with another waterlogged pitch with pools of standing water. The home team was thought to have been lucky to win (0-5). "A draw would have been a fitting result as the visitors played well in appalling conditions" commented The Cornishman newspaper. The following week a letter from the Redruth secretary read "I was directed to write to you and thank your club for the fine sporting game we had on Saturday last. The conditions were deplorable but the game itself was played in such a happy spirit that everyone enjoyed it. Your fellows were most unlucky to lose".

A midweek meeting saw Blundell's School "Give Citizen's A Fright" and achieve parity with the club (8-8). Three days later Exeter again disappointed with a disjointed display by the backs in defeat at Newton Abbot (6-14).

Another defeat followed a week later when luck did not accompany the team to Barnstaple, Full-back Harvey Boots missed the train and by the time he arrived at the ground a substitute had been recruited. Conditions were deplorable as heavy rain during the first half turned the pitch into a quagmire. To make matters worse the second period was played in fog. An essentially forward game favoured the heavier home side who went on to win (3-5).

Another mainly forward game took place at the County Ground when Redruth came to play their return fixture. The Cornish team proved to be disappointing and Exeter were said to be worthy winners in what was another forward dominated game (8-3).

Teignmouth was next on the fixture list for the Chiefs but in effect the club placed two equal strength teams in the field, the other facing Sidmouth. At Teignmouth the senior team played brilliant rugby in the mud and avenged the earlier home defeat (15-0). This was Ken Wreford's last game for the club before departing for London where he played for the Richmond club.

After leading at half-time at Paignton, Exeter lost Jenkins, one of the forwards, through injury and the home team managed to pull clear (6-8). Depleted by "injuries and alterations" a draw at home to Barnstaple was the disappointing result from "a game of many line-outs" (3-3).

Recovering their poise Exeter proceeded to finish the season with eight further matches without defeat. A "rousing tussle" on a heavy County Ground against Old Blues found Exeter falling behind before a "picture try" engineered by Peter Steele-Perkins and finished off by Bill Sprake revived the home side. Most of the second half was spent in the opponents half but only one more try was added to the score (8-5).

The customary pre-Easter match at Tiverton was cancelled. On Good Friday Burton visited the County Ground and in similar fashion to the previous game Exeter did most of the attacking but had only eight points to show for their efforts. The press described the visiting team as third-rate (8-0).

On Easter Monday previous shortcomings were put aside when the Exeter team performed "like a scoring machine" by scoring seven tries against Old Millhillians who fielded an

international and four county players. The difference between the sides was the “irresistible form” of the Exeter backs whose finishing was superior to that of their opponents (32-8).

April began with a defeat at North Tawton in a mid-week but this fixture appears not to have been included in the official club playing record. Away at Bridgwater & Albion the following Saturday the Exeter backs coped well with heavy ground conditions (15-5). Another mid-week game brought another victory, this time at Newton Abbot. In contrast to the game four days earlier the conditions were said to be good but too much kicking produced a “scrambling game”. A cross-kick by Colin Paul was collected by his brother Phil to score the only try of the match (3-0).

The much anticipated home game against Bridgend was spoilt by a waterlogged pitch and heavy rain. Exeter adapted to the conditions better than their opponents and this time they were judged to be “kicking to advantage”. A draw was probably a fair result (5-5).

By the following Thursday the County Ground was ankle deep in mud. Weston super Mare, who had been defeated only four times in the season to date, turned up one short and Fry of Exeter filled the vacancy. Despite the conditions one newspaper report claimed “As a forward tussle it was the most rousing game seen on the County Ground for several seasons”. It seemed to matter not that there was no scoring which was understandable given the prevailing conditions (0-0).

For the final game of the season Bridgwater & Albion visited for the return match. Reduced to thirteen men in the second half the visitors were no match for the Exeter backs who performed brilliantly (27-0).

At the end of a season that saw all the playing sides do well it was also satisfying to record that the club registered a profit of £58 (£2,150) on the season and even the County Ground had turned a deficit of £114 (£4,220) into a £2 (£75) profit!

Comment was made at the Annual General Meeting that the “playing style was greatly appreciated by all” which would have been a double compliment to the club considering how many matches were played on poor pitches.