

88th Year 1959-0

There was a marked improvement in Exeter's playing performance for the second year running. Out of a total 45 games played, seven more than in the previous season, three-quarters were either won or drawn and the team scored over twice as many points as it conceded. The official first team playing record read Played 45 Won 33 Drawn 2 Lost 10 Points for 561 Points against 261. Tony Lee was again at the helm for this successful campaign.

The season began in promising style with a well-earned victory at Beacon Park over arch rivals Plymouth Albion in a temperature around 26°C. Exeter scored five tries none of which Derek Atkins could convert but he did kick a penalty goal (18-9). This success was quickly followed by three more, all gained at home starting with touring Esher (18-3). "Exeter's youth and fitness bewildered Falmouth" scoring eight tries, all by backs, two of which came after the team had been reduced to fourteen men after an injury (30-0). Teignmouth were this final victims in this opening sequence of wins (20-6). The first set-back came at the end of September when the team, after a promising start, lost by a surprisingly wide margin at Torquay Athletic (0-20). The team atoned for this reverse by achieving a rare victory over St Luke's College in a mid-week game. It should be pointed out that this encounter would have taken place very early in the College team's season (11-3).

October began with a second somewhat surprising defeat, this time at The Rectory against Devonport Services on a hot day and a hard ground (9-16). Pontypool, on their first visit since 1913, played bright football and went into the lead but as the Western Mail reported "the fortunes of the game went against the Welshmen". In the second half hooker Brian Dyer was prevented from following up a kick that he had charged down and a penalty try was awarded. Exeter then forged ahead (17-11). Successive home wins followed. According to the Sunday Mirror "Exeter should have won by double the margin" against St. Ives whose forwards were outweighed by a stone (about 6kg) a man (21-0). Reduced to fourteen men in a storm swept second-half Exeter added six points to the score to defeat Saracens (11-0). A poor performance at home against an understrength Weston super Mare led to defeat (11-19). A week later in Cornwall, Exeter suffered a defeat by Redruth, despite Dick Manley being singled out as "hero of the game" (3-17). After a mid-week win in a fast open game against the Royal Naval Engineering College (16-6) the team was held to a pointless draw at Taunton (0-0). The Taunton Courier headed its report rather oddly with the line "Taunton, Exeter in Rugby Classic". Apparently "There was never a dull moment and play switched rapidly from end to end in a series of daring moves". All that was missing was a score of some sort! The next scheduled home game with Bristol was cancelled as Gloucestershire and Devon were involved in a County Championship match at The Memorial Ground.

From mid-November until the second week of the New Year, Exeter proved victorious in eight consecutive matches. A win over the Royal Marine Corps at the County Ground was notable for the debut of Barrie Carless at fly-half, a student at St. Luke's College who was unable to break into their first team. Despite a still wet pitch and rain, the newcomer combined well with scrum-half Tony Hopper to produce a good open game (18-0). Remaining at home "Exeter should have trebled their score" according to one report as hooker Brian Dyer dominated possession. However, Exeter's distribution was poor and it was left to scrum-half Hopper to initiate attacks against Clifton (24-9). Opponents from Devon featured in four of the next five games. The return of Carless at outside half brought an improvement in the three-quarters away against Exmouth who had "little to offer but resolution against the speed and skill of Exeter" (12-0). Back at home honours were even with the Torquay Athletic pack but the Exeter half-backs held sway thereby helping to avenge the early season defeat in south Devon (5-0). Exeter then won at Barnstaple after "a great struggle" between the two old rivals (6-0). The week-end before Christmas found Exeter in London facing Old Blues where "Tony Lee and his raw-boned Devon pack took the honours in a sea of mud" (6-3). The County

Ground was muddy on Boxing Day, yet Exeter “raced to victory” against Exmouth with winger Tony Marks touching down four times (24-0).

The first game in January, at the County Ground, saw the Taunton team fall to its first defeat in seven weeks. Exeter scored five tries with all conversion attempts failing (15-5). So often the bogey team, Weston super Mare put an end to the run of victories when, on their own ground, the Somerset team came from being behind on the score-board to achieve a double over its Devon rivals (8-9). Exeter responded to this set back by remaining undefeated in the next eight matches. Firstly came a revenge defeat of Redruth at the County Ground. “Honours were almost even” but Exeter scored the only try of the game three minutes from no-side (6-3). Then followed a comfortable home win over Barnstaple (18-3). A visit to the capital brought victory over London Hospital (8-5) after which Streatham went down to a narrow defeat on the County Ground. “Exeter had enough of the play to scored thirty points” but managed only an Atkins penalty goal (3-0).

The last two week-ends in February found Exeter travelling, firstly to the far west and then east again to London. Falmouth took an early lead then “Exeter got moving” with wing-forward Ted Bonner, scorer of two tries, outstanding. The second have was scoreless. (11-3). The following week Exeter had to settle for a draw at Honor Oak Park against Guy’s Hospital whose main modes of attack were forward foot rushes and waiting for Exeter mid-field errors. (5-5). March began with a victory at home over Plymouth Albion, thus achieving the double over their rivals. With Roy Lewis filling in at stand-off the team took until half-time to settle (15-5). Continuing the run of success, Devonport Services were seen off at the County Ground in a game of fast attractive rugby (14-3).

Fortunes then turned again for the next three games. St. Luke’s College, now at their peak won the usual mid-week-meeting (0-9) and then Exeter went off on their two match tour to Wales. Defeated in both games Exeter nevertheless played some enterprising rugby against Bridgend (3-8) and Ebbw Vale (6-11).

Despite the usual hectic end of season fixture list, Exeter came through the final eleven matches with flying colours losing only twice in and winning the remainder. At the end of March, Exeter, at home, despite squandering many scoring opportunities, saw off Cheltenham (14-3) and then Paignton at Queen’s Park (9-3). On the road to Cornwall again, Exeter defeated Penzance & Newlyn, who were outweighed (14-8) before returning home to win against Newton Abbot (22-3).

The following four games were all played at the County Ground. The week before Easter Bath visited and went home defeated. Beset by injuries, the visitors faced a home side playing with confidence. Bath attacked whenever they could but the Exeter defence held firm and after being behind by three points scored eight unanswered points of their own in the second period (8-3). The holiday period began with victory over Old Cranleighans by a single point in a fine display of open rugby (17-16) but this narrow margin was just a prelude to the best performance of the season.

“Crushing Defeat for Moseley” declared a headline in the Birmingham Post. The tourists were forced to play a number of players out of position but still attempted to play an open game. Hooker Brian Dyer dominated the set scrums for Exeter but Moseley managed to gain useful line-out possession. Exeter ran in as many as eight tries, some from interceptions. Derek Atkins was successful with seven conversions and two penalty goals. The visitors managed only a single penalty goal. Exeter achieved its highest score against Moseley since fixtures between the two teams began in 1925 (44-3).

It was a different story the following day when Exeter failed to register any score at all against Leicester. Exeter once more gained possession from set scrums but the visitors proved to be far superior in the loose and the home side failed to counter the three tries scored against them (0-9). Leicester fielded two British Lions in this game – Phil Horrocks-Taylor of England and the legendary Tony O’Reilly of Ireland, each of whom went over for tries.

Away from home, Exeter powered past Teignmouth with winger Tony Marks scoring a hat-trick of tries (23-10). The last major game of the season – the regular mid-week game with touring Newport – ended in defeat (3-11). On the final day of the season Exeter took a strong team to Sidmouth to win against the plucky local team (14-3).