

117th Year 1988-9

By the end of the season the club was justifiably in a buoyant mood. "Season 1988-89 was the best season the club has enjoyed for many years" declared the Annual Report which continued "It was a season when many young players proved their capability in senior rugby and there seems every prospect that the progress made over the last few seasons can be maintained". The team was led by second-row forward Dave Hartland, a paramedic with Devon Air Ambulance Service. He had as his vice-captain full back Malcolm Collins who played in all but two first team games.

The season began brightly with seven victories in succession during the month of September. Two friendlies, both at the County Ground, commenced activities with Public School Wanderers (?-?) and Stourbridge (25-12) providing good preparation for the Courage League Division 3 season which began with a visit from Sheffield. This time Exeter avenged the defeat inflicted on them by the visitors from Yorkshire the previous season with a more than promising display. Exeter stormed into the strong opposing pack but although dominating the first quarter only six points were registered. When Exeter fell behind later in the game, skipper Hartland "gave the players a bit of a rollicking". The response took the team back into a lead that was held for the final ten minutes (19-12).

Hard on the heels of the first league game came a first round tie in the John Player Cup competition. Sudbury, the visitors from Suffolk could not match Exeter's "efficient team performance" that included four tries from Andy Green (40-12). For the first away game of the season Exeter travelled to Kidbrooke in Kent to play Askeans, newly promoted to Division 3. The home side had a player dismissed from the field and Exeter, who "gave a very disciplined performance", eased home (20-6). The club programme was to comment that "captain Dave Hartland and his vice-captain Malcolm Collins are to be congratulated on the way they marshalled their side during a very difficult game".

Even though the measure of the club's success was based on League and Cup performances, traditional fixtures were still important in gauging the club's progress. Nothing illustrated this more than the mid-week game at the County Ground against a near full-strength Gloucester side. "Exeter came back from the dead.... They defeated the mighty Gloucester the first time they had done so ... in five years" wrote Bill Fenwick in the Western Morning News. Exeter missed the services of the regular front row as well as flanker Westgate and scrum-half Maunder. A heavier Gloucester pack caused Exeter to spend most of the first half on the defensive and the visitors led by eleven points to nil at the interval. Immediately on the resumption Andy Green landed a penalty. A dozen minutes later the same player darted over for a try that was converted by Collins. After trading penalties with the visitors, Exeter scored a second Collins penalty and a drop goal from Green, before a tense final few minutes saw Exeter home. "A memorable win over the mighty Gloucester" was the modest comment in the following club programme (18-14).

The first month ended with a win at home over Exmouth (?-?), before Exeter entered a run of three defeats without Andy Green, who had broken a bone in this wrist in the game with Exmouth. The first Division 3 defeat was inflicted by visitors Nuneaton. With a quarter of an hour to go and the scores level, Exeter on attack kicked ahead but a Nuneaton back caught the ball and threaded his way through the defence on run that led to a try, the game slipped away from Exeter (12-25). A visit to Saracens ended with a conclusive defeat (0-33). League activity resumed with a visit to West Hartlepool where the local press said "West certainly didn't play well" but Collins had an off day with the boot and Exeter could not get close to the home team total (3-16).

A home win over Tiverton (46-0) was a good warm up for the second round Pilkington Cup match against Redruth at the County Ground, which Exeter duly won this season to make sure of victory" (18-3). Two more Division 3 games were won. At home against low lying Metropolitan Police, "Exeter had to work as hard as in any game". A push-over try, touched down by Mike Cathery, six minutes from time, secured the win (14-6). Victor at Maidstone was more easily achieved (21-0). At

this point in the season talk in the clubhouse centred on the possibility of promotion to League 2 rather than survival in the lower tier. But hopes were dented when the next League game at Fylde ended in a narrow defeat after a last minute penalty attempt was missed (14-16). Hard on the heels of this defeat came another, this time at home in a friendly against Cheltenham (9-23).

A home victory over St. Ives (19-9) was followed by a heavy defeat at Beacon Park by Plymouth Albion (3-42). At the Recreation Ground Exeter reasserted itself with a clear cut win over Torquay Athletic with pack continuing its improved level of performance (24-9). Exeter at home was also successful in local derbies against Barnstaple (13-7) and Devonport Services (31-7) before meeting Plymouth Albion again. This game, played at the County Ground, was the first National Division meeting between these old rivals. Exeter performed better in this game than they three weeks earlier, making the visitors fight hard for victory (6-21). Albion now stood at the top of the division with a 100% record.

“Progress in the Pilkington Cup ended with a below par performance at Havant” said a club match programme. The Division 4 team played to the conditions to which Exeter did not adapt (3-9). Possibly in reaction to this defeat, Exeter recorded substantial wins against Devon & Cornwall Police at home (43-7), away at Birmingham (41-4) and, back at home again, against Crediton (19-10) and Launceston (31-12).

The next major event on the calendar was a home tie with Plymouth Albion in the semi-final of the Bass Devon Cup competition. In previous rounds Exeter had defeated Totnes (42-0) and Tiverton (10-4), both away from home, but now to the outside observer Exeter’s prospects would not have appeared to be too bright. Albion were riding high in the League and had held the Devon Cup for the last six seasons. In addition Exeter had not beaten the rival club since March 1981 but, as Bill Fenwick in the Western Morning News reported, “Exeter confounded the pundits to win ... in a pulsating semi-final match...” Supporters were elated, as were coach Bob Staddon, chairman of selectors John Baxter and John Lockyer whose dedication during the lean years was now rewarded. Although a great team effort, praise was due to Exeter’s mobile light-weight pack. Tension caused Exeter to miss half a dozen kicks at goal but full-back Malcolm Collins landed two vital efforts that won the game (6-0).

The next Division 3 game did not go so well. At Rugby, for the second time in the season, fly-half Andy Green broke a bone, this time a collar bone, which ended his season early. The disruption this caused did not serve Exeter well and the team could not match the home side’s efforts (3-23). Camborne then came to the County Ground and won (14-19). A better home performance saw the defeat of Torquay Athletic but reports suggest the margin of victory should have been higher (32-14). April began with two away losses –Wakefield in a League game (18-29) and Bristol (3-45). Exeter bounced back with a narrow home win over Blackheath (12-10). For the final League match of the season Exeter decided to rest three key players before the forthcoming Devon Cup Final and the sacrifice resulted in victory for Vale of Lune at the County Ground (12-26).

All attention was then drawn to Pottington Road and the final of the Bass Devon Cup against Barnstaple. A crowd of 2,000 witnessed what Rugby World described as “a real old Devon full-blooded encounter”. “In a stirring encounter, worthy of the final, the irresistible second half performance by Exeter’s forwards was much more than plucky Barum could handle”, wrote Paul Easterbrook in the Express & Echo. Exeter scored three tries, through winger Ian Stewart, back row Paul Westgate and hooker George Meldon. Barnstaple, who had to cope with an injury to their hooker for part of the game, did manage to register a consolation try that came in injury time. A jubilant Dave Hartland lifted the trophy for Exeter for the first time in eight years (17-9).

To end the playing season the club went on a week-end trip to Cornwall where the team defeated Penzance & Newlyn (?-?) but lost to Penryn (0-12).

The First XV had played 44 games winning 29 and losing 15; 787 points were scored with 570 conceded.

Malcolm Collins was credited with 265 of the points scored. Success was not confined to the senior team. The “A” played 33 matches of which they won 24. One game was drawn and eight lost. The “B” played 32 times winning 27 games, drawing one and losing four. An Extra “B” XV was fielded on fifteen occasions. Thirteen games were won, one drawn and one lost. The Colts, too, enjoyed a successful season and various age group teams coached by former club players were also fielded.