

86th Year 1957-8

A change of captaincy failed to bring about a change in fortunes for the club. Again less than a third of the matches played ended in Exeter's favour. As many as eight games were drawn but still over half the games played ended in defeat.

A.S.E. (Tony) Lee, whose family ran the long established printing company Sydney Lee (Exeter) Ltd. was elected captain. A now regular performer in the second row of the scrum, it was said of him later on his career "Tall lumbering master –printer Ton Lee is by no mean the best second row forward in England, but as the Exeter captain he is an expert tactician and his Rugby brain was behind his club's convincing success at home". By the time of that comment he had helped the club to re-establish its standing amongst the senior Devon clubs and senior opponents in England and Wales. After retirement from the field of play, he became a tireless committee member not only for Exeter but also the county. He served as Devon's representative on the Rugby Football Union committee as well.

To open the new season Exeter welcomed tourists Saracens on the first Saturday of September. A report of the game in The Sunday Times opened with the comment "After fading towards the end of last season Exeter have been practising hard to ensure a good start for the 1957-8 campaign". The club's preparations appeared to have paid off when the team went into an eight point lead and looked like it was heading for a convincing victory. For thirty minutes the two teams were evenly matched. The initial breakthrough came when scrum-half Lewis cut through for a try. Shortly afterwards wing Dai Hill scored another that Derek Atkins converted. Saracens attacked for most of the second period but the Exeter defence held firm until ten minutes from the end when the visitors went over for a converted try to which was added a brilliant drop-goal almost as the final whistle blew (8-8).

On the second Saturday of the month Blackheath were due to visit the County Ground but the Kent club decided to cancel their West County tour. Exeter had first appeared on the Blackheath itinerary in season 1948-9 since when the two sides had met on seven occasions with Exeter being victors four times. Streatham filled the vacancy and the south London club narrowly defeated their hosts whose outside-half, Roy Lewis, dropped more passes than he accepted (6-9). Mid-week found Exeter facing another touring team from the south-east. This time the opposition was provided by Esher and Exeter won comfortably (19-5).

After the promising start to the season, Exeter's form fell away as five defeats were suffered in the next half dozen matches. The first two came against local clubs Torquay Athletic, who scored the only try of the game (3-5), and Paignton (0-5). The next losses came against Bridgend and Ebbw Vale on the week-end outing to Wales. The travelling party was depleted not only by injuries to key players but also an outbreak of influenza. Nonetheless at Bridgend a large crowd admired the visitors determined efforts in the loose against a strong home team (3-18). In a first half against Ebbw Vale that was described as "dreary", Exeter had the better of the exchanges and took the lead with a Roy Pike dropped goal. It was not until the second half that the home team equalised and then took the games away from the visitors with thirteen points in the last twenty minutes (3-16).

Devonport Services was held to a draw at The Rectory with Exeter scoring the only try of the game (6-6). After a run of five away games, Exeter welcomed Saracens on its second visit of the season. The home team led by eight points at half-time but the visitors hit back in the second period to win by a single point (8-9).

After two more victories against local opposition – Exmouth (5-0) and Royal Marines XV (9-6) - another upset came when the club visited Taunton and came away with a sizeable defeat after what the Taunton Courier described as "an exciting game" (6-16). Exeter redressed the balance with a home win over Old Millhillians (8-3) but the next three games were all lost, beginning with a return visit to Devonport Services (3-8). Then at home, Exeter without leading forwards Homer and Manley, faced a Redruth side containing ten county caps. "Exeter fought gallantly throughout" but eventually

had to concede a heavy defeat (6-22). The Sunday Pictorial did not mince words when reporting on the home game against London Hospital. "Exeter are rotten tacklers" it said, as the visitors won in the last minute with a try that started on the Hospital's 25-yard line and ended under the Exeter posts. "No wonder Exeter are losing support" (13-14).

December began with four matches against Devon opponents. Those against Torquay Athletic in an open game that defied the conditions (11-0) and Teignmouth (3-0) were won but a visit to Barnstaple ended in defeat (11-16) as did the Boxing Day game at the County Ground against Exmouth (5-9). For the last encounter of the year, Exeter faced Old Blues at the County Ground where the home side put on an encouraging display to win with some ease (18-6).

Unfortunately the New Year did not bring a continuation of this success. "Taunton's 'Double' Over Exeter" ran the headline of the Taunton Courier report which went on to say that "neither team showed much skill and open play was kept to a minimum by close covering and sound tackling by both sides". Brian Homer won a lot of possession for Exeter but the backs failed to make use of it. The visitors from Somerset scored two tries before Exeter scrum-half, Keith Hopper, nearly scored after evading three tacklers but the fourth stopped him just short of the line. Exeter's only score came from a Derek Atkins penalty goal five minutes before the end (3-6).

The period from mid-January until mid-April produced a mixed bag of results. Having been defeated at home by Redruth, Exeter now travelled to Cornwall where "the forwards kept the ball tight in a grim struggle" and a draw ensued (3-3). All Exeter's points came in the last ten minutes at Beacon Park against "an over confident" Plymouth Albion but the scores came too late to avoid defeat (8-14). At home 18-year-old scrum-half Keith Hopper was instrumental in helping defeat Clifton (19-9). "Exeter undoubtedly had an off day" "on a sticky ground" at Penzance & Newlyn (5-17).

Then came a run of six games during which Exeter went undefeated. This successful run was only narrowly achieved as four of these games ended in a draw, though the other two were won by ten points or more. In a well contested game with Weston super Mare at the County Ground, Exeter went ahead with two John Stark tries but the visitors drew level with a penalty five minutes from no-side (11-11). At Honor Oak Park Guy's Hospital found full-back Derek Atkins in prime defensive form as they applied constant pressure. Neither side was able to register a score (0-0). The highlight of this unbeaten run was a home revenge win over Plymouth Albion (11-0). Another fine defensive display, this time by centre Dai Richards, kept the large visiting Devonport Services centres in check. Atkins landed two penalties to match two tries by the Services (6-6). A mid-week draw at home against St. Luke's (3-3) was followed a clear win over St. Ives at the County Ground (13-3).

The unbeaten run came to an end at Cheltenham where Exeter "were in every respect the equal of their opponents" but "a streak of dazzling form put Cheltenham in front nine minutes from the end" (3-6). At home, a mid-week defeat of Newton Abbot (8-3) preceded a defeat at Weston super Mare where the home team dominated the last twenty minutes (9-15). April began with a home meeting with Barnstaple to replace one cancelled in January. Exeter could derive no satisfaction from the result as the North Devon team achieved a substantial victory (0-17).

Easter began in promising fashion when, despite a numbing wind, Exeter won an open game against touring Old Cranleighans (11-0). On Easter Monday Exeter and Moseley shared the spoils in another fast, open game, "there was never a dull moment" and "fortunes fluctuated continually" as reported by the Birmingham Post. Moseley scored their dozen points in the first half. Exeter then chipped away at the deficit. Atkins kicked a penalty and wingers Stark and Knowles both scored tries. In the last minute scrum-half Lewis dropped a goal to bring the scores level (12-12).

The following day Leicester proved to be too powerful for the home side (6-21) but four days later Exeter recovered to register a home win over Bath. The home loose forwards, who more or less

controlled the game, smothered the visitors attacking attempts. Derek Atkins kicked a penalty and, five minutes after the interval, converted a try scored, appropriately, by No.8 Dick Manley.

The usual tough close to the season saw Exeter suffer five straight defeats. The team gave Newport a hard struggle in mid-week and held the visitors to a single converted try in the second half that was scored just before the final whistle (6-20) but the team proved no match for Bristol (3-29). In Cornwall, "Falmouth, well beaten in scrum and line-out, played a brilliant game in the loose" to achieve victory (0-6). A better performance was shown against Gloucester in the last senior fixture of the season (11-13).