

121st Year 1992-3

As promotion had not been achieved in 1991-2, a “bitterly disappointed” Bob Staddon decided to stand down from his role as head coach. After ending his playing career, Bob stood by the club through its leanest years to the point where the club re-established itself, not only locally but on a national front as well. He continued to serve the club as a committee member.

The new coaching team was now to be headed by Dave Wiggins whose previous experience had included the Army and Brixham,

Andy Maunder was re-elected captain for this season, with Rob Baxter as his deputy.

An illustration of the progress of the game of Rugby Union internationally came with the introduction of a series of new laws and, more apparent to the casual follower of the game, the uplifting of the value of a try to five points.

The new value of a try did not help Clifton in the opening, friendly, game at the County Ground that was used by both clubs as a trial for the new laws. “It was a strange game,” said a Clifton programme, “although we scored 4 tries to their 3 we fell victim to the accurate boot of their fly-half Andy Green who, as well as crossing the line, kicked 15 points in the match” (30-27).

The next home friendly against Stourbridge brought a much clearer cut victory (46-3).

Competitive rugby was soon on the menu with a Pilkington Cup home tie against Newbury. The margin of victory might not suggest it but Exeter’s performance was described as abysmal (30-6). Having struggled in the tight, the Exeter pack was subjected to some changes up front for the following game. For the first Division 3 game of the season Exeter entertained Redruth. The changes made worked well as Exeter dominated a highly regarded Redruth pack. Despite an 80% territorial advantage in the first half only one try was scored, the other points coming from five Green penalties (20-9).

October began with the first away game of the season, a friendly at Nuneaton, where Exeter, on a “mud-spattered” pitch, accounted for their hosts with points to spare (33-6). A scheduled home League game against Askeans, who had arranged to travel by train, had to be postponed when Paddington Station was closed due to a bomb scare. The Askeans game took place a week later, Exeter winning without too much trouble (48-13).

High scoring continued with a home win by a near full strength side over Exeter University (72-13) before five competitive games in a row focused attention on more important issues. Firstly came an away win at Liverpool St. Helens (25-19) in National 3, before Berry Hill visited the County Ground. The “gutsy” team from Gloucestershire made Exeter work hard for victory in the Pilkington Cup game which the home team had been expected to win easily. The visitor’s score was boosted by an injury time try (15-13). Another home game followed and another National 3 victory was recorded. The victim this time was Plymouth Albion who occupied bottom place in the league table (15-8). Having been demoted from Division 2 the previous season, Albion then went through the current season without a League win and were relegated again.

The National 3 game at Clifton was played in poor weather but “the performance of both sides was a credit to all involved”. Exeter held a seven point lead right up to the final minute when Clifton scored a try in the corner that was, despite the poor conditions, converted by an excellent effort from the touch-line to bring the scores level (13-13).

The match programme of the day contained some prophetic words. By co-incidence the two teams had been drawn to meet each other in the third round of the Pilkington Cup the week following the League game. The writer of the notes observed “In the current climate of the game both clubs will no

doubt consider a positive result today to be more vital than a win next week as league points are more important than cup glory". He was not to know that if Exeter had won instead of drawing the League game, the extra point gained would, all other things being equal, have been enough for Exeter to finish top of the Division!

Back at Cribbs Causeway for the Pilkington Cup match "it was a different story with Exeter producing an outstanding performance and winning" in what was described by Rugby World as "a hard fought game" (19-3).

A batch of non-competitive games took the club into the second half of these season. These so called "friendly" games produced a mixed bag of results. Defeat at Saracens might not have been a surprise (7-34), but a rare home win over Gloucester would probably not have been predicted. All the visitors points came from penalties as Exeter kept their line intact and won by a penalty near the end of the game (21-18). A defeat at Beacon Park by Plymouth Albion followed (16-22). Away to Torquay Athletic, Exeter managed eventually to break down the stubborn home defence to win (25-9). Then a home victory against Barnstaple was registered on the first Saturday in January (36-9).

The first league fixture in the second half of the season was a home meeting with newly promoted Havant, with both sides boasting unbeaten National 3 records. The visitors strength lay with a huge pack that found the heaving pitch to its advantage but, as Express & Echo's Paul Easterbrook summed up, "One of Exeter's biggest crowds for years saw brain beat brawn". For twenty minutes little went right for Exeter but before half time bright, open play brought two tries. Andy Green's boot kept Havant at bay and for the remainder of the game, that included five minutes of injury time, the visitors could make little headway (21-13).

Pilkington Cup rugby returned and Exeter travelled to face Redruth for a game that was far from a foregone conclusion. From the out-set Exeter demonstrated that the renowned Hell-Fire Corner held no fear for them. In a "cheek-cracking" wind, Redruth relied on kick and chase tactics in attack whereas Exeter persisted in keeping the play open. The home team took the lead with a penalty goal, the only score of the first half, but eight minutes into the second half Exeter took the lead through a try by Cornishman Mark Chatterton. A later Green penalty secured the win as Exeter, in the words of Mark Reason in The Times, "gave Redruth and the crowd nothing" (8-3).

A couple of victories over less demanding opposition – at Basingstoke (22-7) and at home against Tiverton (50-8) – took Exeter into February and another league fixture.

The game, away to Aspatria, was unique in the club's history. For the first time the team and support staff flew to a domestic fixture. The flight from Exeter to Carlisle was made in a converted Datapost aeroplane. It was also the first time that Aspatria had a visiting team fly in for the day. In the match programme the hosts acknowledged the then current status of "high-flying" Exeter but, even so, it turned out to be a close encounter (21-16).

For the first time Exeter reached the Quarter Final stage of the Pilkington Cup, the only 3rd Division side to do so. Prospects were daunting as the club's opponents were Leicester who were sitting in third place in the Division 1 table. Exeter supporters were not to be put off by what might lay in store as a special train was hired to carry 600 of them to the game.

A tally of thirteen tries being scored against them may not have been anticipated, but the team tried to play an open game when limited possession came their way. Maunder even declined a relatively simple penalty attempt. It was only toward the end of the game when tiredness took hold that the tackling became less secure. "Underdogs are pounded by a try rout" ran a Sunday Times headline but the reporter then added that the team's efforts "richly deserved the standing ovation at the end" from the 9,000 strong crowd at Welford Road. Despite the reaction of the crowd, coach Wiggings comments was "What a disaster" (0-76). Leicester went on to lift the trophy.

The return to League rugby a fortnight later brought disappointment, when Leeds won at the County Ground. "Exeter's hopes of promotion take a nose-dive" ran the headline to the report in the Western Morning News. "Exeter appeared pedestrian and never managed to settle down into any cohesive pattern". The respectable scoreline rather flattered the overall performance (28-33). A home win in a friendly over Camborne (21-6) preceded another defeat in the League at Sheffield (6-15).

The next League game, at home against Otley, held an unusual significance being described as a "crunch game". Otley was pushing for the title of Division 3 champions. Exeter on the other hand, after two recent defeats, actually stood in danger of relegation if victory was not achieved. Another restructuring of the League system meant the top team would be promoted and only the next three teams would remain in Division 3. The remainder would join the 4th Division. Exeter played with control and discipline. The forwards outplaying a heavier opposing pack on a rain sodden pitch. After going behind by thirteen points with thirty minutes gone in the second half, Otley hit back with eight points of their own but Exeter held out for a final ten nail-biting minutes. "This was probably Exeter's most important win of an eventful season!" said the Western Morning News 16-11).

A local Derby game at home saw Rob Walker sent off after half an hour. The remaining fourteen held on to defeat Torquay Athletic (13-0).

Two weeks later away at Broughton Park, Exeter defeated their low-lying opponents to claim third position in the league (33-19).

Meanwhile, Exeter had once again reached the final of the Devon Cup having despatched on the way Devon & Cornwall Police (65-6), Barnstaple (27-8) and Okehampton (16-7). On the last Saturday of the season, Exeter faced Brixham at the County Ground in the final. The South Devon club made the holders fight hard for their fifth successive trophy success. Exeter led by only five points at half time but Exeter pulled away in the second period (35-21).

During the course of the season Andy Green scored a total of 365 points, placing him second in the National Leagues points scoring table.

Although the First XV lost only five games out of 36 played, there was a sense of failure in missing the ultimate goal of **promotion**.