

98th Year 1969-0

Andy Cole retained the captaincy for a season that saw improvement in club performances but probably disappointed supporters as well. The total number of games played rose to 43 of which just over half were won. Three games were drawn and eighteen ended in defeat. A record number of points was scored, the total 703 being bolstered by scores of over 50 points against the unfortunate Devonport Services. Exeter conceded 25 points on only two occasions.

A disappointing start to the season was made when St. Mary's College (Dublin), on the club's first tour to Devon, won convincingly on the County Ground. The first half was a drab, typically early season affair. Exeter made too many mistakes and by the interval the tourist led through three penalty goals. Exeter then began to play with more vigour but slipped further behind to two tries scored by the visitor's international scrum-half Johnny Moloney. The only home score came from a Bob Staddon try before he suffered a foot injury (3-19).

Any hope of an immediate improvement was dashed by Moseley at The Reddings when the two clubs resumed their early season fixture. Moseley attacked from the outset and dominated the game scoring seven tries. Michael Blair of the Birmingham Daily Post said somewhat unkindly that "Meeting Exeter was like proving that a Rolls can beat a pram". Exeter did manage to score two late tries (9-25).

Back on home soil Exeter managed a narrow win over Esher (11-9) before scoring eight tries against Rosslyn Park who had decided to limit their tour schedule to Devon rather than including Cornwall as a cost cutting exercise. A Rosslyn Park XV had visited Exeter at Easter 1928 but the London club did not regard this meeting as a first class fixture. Without the services of the injured Staddon, Exeter could convert only one of the tries scored. Wing forward David Hughes was the successful kicker (26-6).

Mid-week visitors Newton Abbot succumbed quite easily (31-6) before a visit to the Recreation Ground saw Exeter achieve a close but satisfying win over Torquay Athletic (23-17). The next visitors to the County Ground came in the form of the representative Army team. The sides were well matched and a draw was a fair result (16-16). Glamorgan Wanderers, the next visiting side, gamely stuck to the task when reduced to fourteen players just before half time. A short while later, Exeter was similarly handicapped when Terry Hempton was reduced to walking pace through injury. "The fifth victory of the season underlined the purposeful and attractive quality of their play" local commentator Eric Hill wrote about the Exeter performance. The team had overcome its early season problems (24-6).

At The Rectory, Exeter steamrollered a depleted Devonport Services side. Exeter had four players returning to duty whilst Services had lost two players posted to Northern Ireland and were forced to play a hooker at scrum-half. The scoring was relentless and by the end Exeter had crossed the opposition line fourteen times (61-6). It was a different state of affairs the following week at Redruth, The lead changed hand a couple of times and Exeter led at half time but the team could add nothing more to their account whilst the home team went ahead scoring eleven more points (10-17).

A late revival in the next home game against Saracens came too late for Exeter. The visitors, thirteen points up at half time, held the home side to two tries in the second period (13-19). There was a similar pattern to Exeter's next home game. Behind at half time, Exeter rallied but could not counter the points scored by the visitors Clifton who won the fixture for the second year running. Exeter fielded a side that lacked the services of ten players either injured or playing for Devon (11-15). For the third successive week the half-time score did not favour Exeter, but on this occasion the second half did bring about a victory over Taunton. Exeter's first half performance was described as "inept" whilst the Taunton forwards dominated. After the interval "a new purpose appeared in the Exeter performance". "For the Somerset team the result must have been a bitter disappointment" (17-13).

A home game against Exmouth was visited by icy showers that made the ball difficult to handle. Exeter, missing seven first choice players, overcame the opposition who did not have the talent to take advantage of their weakened rivals (14-0). After a week off because of the weather Exeter, at home, defeated Paignton with ease (29-3) before travelling to London where a drawn game with Streatham-Croydon was played (0-0).

December began with a home win over Torquay Athletic in a game that was not as one sided as the score suggested. In an open game, Exeter led by seven points at the interval. The visitors played pluckily and for the last twenty minutes had to play with fourteen men because of injury and for a short period the team was reduced to thirteen. In fact they scored a try in this period. Meanwhile Exeter added another twenty one points (34-11). At this stage in the season, Exeter had not been beaten by another Devon team but at Barnstaple this run all but came to an end. Exeter scored first but Barnstaple led by three points at the interval. The home team increased the lead to eight points but Exeter struck back with a try and in the final minute added another through second-row Neil Diment, his first of the season. Bob Staddon converted from an easy position to equalise the score (11-11).

This was a near slip-up for Exeter and the team might not have anticipated the banana skin that awaited them in the next game. It would have come as a surprise. At home early in November a weakened Exeter team had easily coped with a visit from Exmouth, but on Boxing Day at the Imperial Ground, a similarly understrength team could not make any headway against the home team who won by the only score of the game. Exmouth had not beaten Exeter for four years. (0-3). The New Year did not start well either with two more away games and two more defeats. After the disappointing meeting in November, Taunton took ample revenge at Priory Park (6-25). To follow came Bridgwater & Albion's first defeat of Exeter since the war, a game that produced just a single score (0-3).

"Mud, mud, glorious mud" greeted Belfast Royal Academy Former Pupils at the County Ground. The game was a scrappy affair with much kicking. Exeter took the lead shortly after one of the visiting props had been taken to hospital with a cut above his eye. The Belfast captain took the unusual step of asking the referee and Andy Cole if a substitute could be fielded. This was agreed. Replacement of injured players had been introduced in 1968-9 at International level, but this ruling was not yet in general club use. Scrum-half Graham Milford sneaked a try and Peter Gribble went over following the first real three-quarter movement of the match (12-0).

A Saturday home fixture with Bristol produced a better all-round performance. After the visitors had taken an early lead, Exeter went ahead with a converted try but half way through the first period the services of Phil Holman were lost through injury. On this occasion there was no request to field a replacement! The seven man Exeter pack held out until the pressure told and Bristol scored three more tries in the last fifteen minutes (8-15). A trip to meet London Hospital ended in a clear victory (18-6) before the weather robbed Exeter of a home game with Weston super Mare. After this break, at the County Ground, "Exeter finally laid the bogey of Barnstaple with a convincing win" thereby avenging the Devon Cup defeat of the previous season. Exeter went ahead in the first minute with a David Hughes try. Fourteen points to the good at the interval, Exeter managed one more try against a strong wind in the second half (19-10).

After the showing against Barnstaple, a defeat at home by Guy's Hospital would have been disappointing (11-14), especially as it came the week prior to a Devon Cup match. As it turned out, in a later club programme, Secretary Jack Challenger could write "I am sure all our patrons join me in congratulating Andy Cole and his team for their brilliant victory at Plymouth last week" (14-6). For a game at the County Ground, the Devonport Services team was depleted by the call-up of three players for the Royal Navy representative team to face the Royal Air Force. In consequence the Services proved to be no match for Exeter who scored more or less at will, Peter Gribble notched four tries (54-0). In two meetings so far in the season Exeter had scored 115 points without replay from the Services.

Exeter could not maintain the form the team had shown in the previous two games and the next two matches ended in defeat. The first came in a mid-week game against St. Luke's College (9-11) and the second in Wales against Bridgend, who at the time headed the Welsh club table. It took the home team twenty minutes to register a score and by half time Exeter trailed by nine points. In the end Bridgend kept the visitors at full stretch and it was reported that it was to Exeter's credit that the home side was limited to six tries (3-20). Three days later, back at home, Exeter faced Torquay Athletic in a quarter final match in the Devon Cup competition. Having defeated the 'Tics twice so far in the season, Exeter made no mistake in this third meeting although the margin was not a decisive one (12-6).

The Good Friday opposition was no longer provided by Old Cranleighans who had been visiting since 1956. On this occasion Exeter re-established fixtures with Woodford for the first time since 1938-9. Unfortunately the team from Essex proved no match for Exeter. To their credit the visitors found themselves only three points down at half time but then Exeter ran riot with full-back Staddon spending most of the time playing as an additional centre three-quarter. Ten tries were registered in all (47-8). According to The Times "A combination of bad luck and the failure to make the most of their opportunities cost Exeter victory against Moseley". The match was highly entertaining with Moseley leading by ten points at half time and Exeter then coming back to within striking distance of the opposition score despite the loss of hooker Mike Cook with concussion. It was in injury time that a further try secured the game for Moseley (16-21). The following Saturday Exeter put in an accomplished performance away from home in defeating Esher. Bob Staddon was the inspiration for victory, once again appearing in the back line and opening the scoring with a try of his own (20-3). A mid-week game at Teignmouth also ended in victory (13-6). Another clear cut win came at the County Ground scoring seven tries against Penzance & Newlyn (27-5).

Only three days were left for recovery before Exeter was due to face Devonport Services in a semi-final game for the Devon Cup. Far from the runaway victories of the previous two encounters, this time Exeter found the Services a tougher nut to crack at Rectory Field (19-3). So far so good, might have been applied to Exeter's performances in late season but because cup games had now to be fitted into the schedule, Exeter now had to play as many as ten games in the month of April alone. The first four were won but success came in only one game of the final six.

At Abertillery, it was reported the home side was "given a hard fight by Exeter and that Exeter failed to score was something of a mystery In a match in which nothing went right for Exeter". This was the only game all season when Exeter failed to register a score of any kind (0-13). Another defeat by a Welsh opponent came at the County Ground only two days later when Cardiff, on tour, won a close match (6-14).

In the same week, three days later, Exeter lost the game they would dearly loved to have won – the Devon Cup Final against St. Luke's College. Due to a cancellation in November, the two teams had met only once previously in the season in a game that the students won by two points. In the Final the margin was much more decisive (3-19).

Two days after, a Saturday win over Redruth may have afforded some compensation (24-13). Yet two more tough games were still to play. The first of these came at the County Ground where Gloucester, on tour, won a closely contested game (9-11). Finally at The Recreation Ground against Bath, Exeter scored within two minutes of the start and then again in the final minute. In between times Bath had registered sixteen points (10-16).