

106th Year 1977-8

“The season was one of the best the Club has ever had and showed a considerable improvement upon the previous one” was the verdict presented at the Annual General Meeting. The record might have been even better but for early season non-availability of players and injuries sustained in pre-season training. The forwards were again outstanding and there was an improvement behind the scrum with greater pace being apparent.

A total of 46 games were played of which 38 ended in victory and only eight games were lost. Twice as many points were scored by the club as were conceded. Paul Baxter had been elected as captain again but a knee ligament injury caused him to stand down after the first game of the season. Jon Jenkins took over and stayed in post even when Baxter returned to the side in January. Jenkins, a civil engineer, had first appeared in the senior team during April 1972 as a wing three-quarter from which position he was twice leading try scorer in a season. He occasionally stood-in at fly-half and he also representative Devon as a winger. In March 1979 he left for Hong Kong to pursue his engineering career.

Nine matches were crammed into the first month of the season. The opening day saw Exeter at Ilfracombe where the local club was embarking on its centenary celebrations (20-9). Next came one of those games when Exeter tripped over the hurdle of a determined local rival. On its own ground a spirited Tiverton side just edged its local rival by a single point (14-15). Exeter, at home, then easily overcame the efforts of Teignmouth (50-0).

A week-end trip to London did not achieve the results anticipated, in fact, the two games played ended in heavy defeats. Meeting Rosslyn Park for a Friday evening kick-off, the Exeter team was “completely outclassed” according to a report. Exeter had no answer to the inventiveness of the home backs and in the last quarter “Park reigned supreme” (3-33). Matters got no better the following day at Esher. Hooker Lockyer had to go off at half time and Exeter suffered a series of minor injuries (6-23). “Disaster Double” ran one headline.

The results of the next three games, all played at home against local opposition, would have been greeted with some relief. Firstly Paignton put up a gallant display against an understrength Exeter side (24-4). Still unable to field its strongest side, Exeter fought a tense, exciting battle with Torquay Athletic. In the first half Exeter managed to score from limited opportunities and led by a dozen points. This was just as well as the visitors whittled away at the home side’s lead. Exeter fought a desperate rear-guard action, especially when reduced to fourteen after prop Trevor Harris had to leave the field with concussion. “It was a marvellous performance” wrote Paul Huddart, who proclaimed flanker and try scorer, Fred Hartley as “man of the match” (15-13).

A mid-week visit by Newton Abbot, their first visit for six years, was greeted by a sympathetic note in the match programme. “Just recently they have going through a very lean spell. Last season it would appear was their worst season ever, but although as yet, they have to register their first win this season, there is a decided improvement in attitude and approach ...” (49-0).

Dismal was the weather for a visit by Bath and dismal was the outcome of the game for Exeter. After five minutes the home team went ahead with a try, but they trailed by eight points at the half-way mark. A fight back did produce two more tries but they were not enough to prevent victory by the visitors (16-25). Of the nine games played in the month, Exeter had lost four. Only four further defeats were experienced in the remaining seven months of the season.

Despite continuing injuries to key players, a heartening victory was achieved at Cross Keys. In addition the team was without its captain, Jon Jenkins, due to illness (13-7). An away game with Avon & Somerset Police was also won (11-0). It appeared that some consistency was returning to the team when Saracens visited the County Ground but Alan Gibson’s report in The Times, “on what

really was an untidy and unskilful match”, suggested otherwise. At this stage of the season Exeter would hardly have expected to beat the team from London. The visitors “played the more talented rugby, and always seemed to have greater reserves of power” but Exeter at the end of the game had won by a distance. “You cannot seriously argue with three tries against one” wrote Gibson (22-7).

Disappointment returned when Birmingham came to the County Ground. Deprived of the services of six county players, Exeter welcomed the visitors more in hope than expectation and the hopes were nearly realised. Lacking invention, the visitors were trailing by two penalties to one with fifteen minutes to go. The Exeter defence held good until the Birmingham full-back came into the attack and forced himself over the line (6-9).

Exeter now entered a run of sixteen consecutive victories. For the next home game against Penryn the Exeter ranks were even more depleted when as many as seven players were on Devon duty. Penryn was supplying two of their number to Cornwall. Exeter, applying almost constant pressure, led by a solitary penalty goal at half time. After a second penalty Exeter opened out in the second period but only one try, by winger Simon Perry, was registered (12-0).

The next visiting team was Taunton, another club that was experiencing a lean spell on the field. At a time of nationwide power cuts and blackouts, reporter Geoff Harvey-Barnes observed that “Taunton could not hold a candle to the powerful home side”. Exeter’s display was much sharper than it had been the previous week enabling the team to win convincingly even without the services of scrum-half Milford and the regular front row (30-13).

“In spite of Exeter’s decisive victory ... this eagerly awaited confrontation between two of the top clubs in the south-west did not quite live up to expectations” wrote Ross Salmon in the Sunday Telegraph after a game against St. Ives at the County Ground. Exeter struggled for possession. The visiting pack won ten heels against the head in the set scrums. Exeter eventually scored five tries, three of them by winger Simon Perry, through the initiative of their backs in broken play (22-3).

The next game, again at home, was a sad occasion as Exeter and St. Luke’s College were set to face each other for the last time. The College was about to be absorbed into Exeter University and would no longer be fielding a side under its own name. The College (as Exeter Training College) was the first team met by the Exeter club in October 1872 and in post-war years games against St. Luke’s were amongst the most eagerly anticipated on Exeter’s card. For this last match Exeter was able to field a first-choice front row and won its fair share of possession and the club was able to sign off the series against St. Luke’s with a victory (25-8).

For the first time in six weeks Exeter left its home base to play. Cheltenham provided the opposition and a comfortable victory was registered (20-9). Still on the road, Exeter then defeated Torquay Athletic by exactly the same score. Not only did Bob Staddon kick four penalties, he also set up winger Simon Perry for his two tries (20-9). Exeter returned home for a victory over Barnstaple (38-0).

Back on the road, it took Exeter an hour of play to settle down against Glamorgan Wanderers. A strong finish against a tiring home team saw Exeter open out and score two tries through wingers Jeffery and Jenkins (16-10). The traditional Boxing Day fixture at Exmouth did not provide such an easy win as it had in recent seasons. Unfortunate injuries meant Andy Jeffery (broken leg) and Steve Collier (cut eye) had to be taken to hospital as the Exeter team was reduced to thirteen players (18-4).

Before the New Year’s Eve home game against Plymouth Albion, a minute’s silence was observed in memory of Jack Force, a player before and after the war and a former Chairman of the Exeter club, who had died suddenly the previous day. Exeter went on to win a keen struggle which saw “some kind of record for the number of appearances the club doctor made on the field” (15-9). To start the New Year an easier victory was gained at Priory Park at the expense of Taunton (26-6).

Exeter's first appearance of the season in the Devon Cup found the team facing Exeter University. The two teams had last met at senior level in October 1961. The main difference between the sides was up front where the Exeter forwards held sway. The University gave a lively performance but could not hold the home side in the latter stages of the game (40-9). Another forty point display followed against Clifton (42-9) before Exeter accounted for Bridgwater & Albion (22-6). Both of these latter two games were played at the County Ground.

A first round home tie against Bath in the John Player Cup competition was eagerly anticipated even though Bath had won at the County Ground at the start of the season. The outcome represented another step on Exeter's progress to national recognition. On their own admission Bath was completely outplayed on the day by a great home pack. On a muddy surface the Exeter eight dominated and the back row effectively contained the threat of John Horton, Bath's England fly-half. Exeter did not solely depend on defence and scored three tries, two of which came in the last five minutes (20-6). After an enforced lengthy lay-off with a knee injury, Paul Baxter returned to the side to play a full part in the notable victory.

Games did not become any easier as Exeter then had to travel to Falmouth for a Merit Table contest. It was suggested that Exeter's performance may well have been a reaction after the victory over Bath. For all their attacking play Exeter could not break through the defence. At full time it appeared that the game would end in a pointless draw but in the seventh minute of injury time full-back Staddon gathered the ball forty yards out from the Falmouth posts. He paused momentarily and then dropped a goal high between the uprights, much to the delight of his team-mates (3-0).

For the second round of the John Player Cup Exeter had drawn Coventry for a game to be played at the County Ground. Unfortunately preparations for this match were severely disrupted when a heavy fall of snow that covered the County Ground to a depth of three feet, meant games against Weston super Mare and Barnstaple on the two Saturdays leading up to the cup match had to be cancelled. It might have been possible to play against Barnstaple, in what would have been a Devon Cup encounter, had a call for volunteers to clear the pitch of snow been answered by a greater number. Two hundred were needed but only twenty were mustered. The pitch under its covering was unfrozen but the team was still unable to train on the thick snow covering.

When Exeter took the field on the appointed day the snow had gone but pumps had to be employed to take away the excess water. Inevitably, the playing surface was muddy. As far as the game itself was concerned it did not turn into the sort of contest Exeter wanted. A later club programme described it as "a salutary lesson". The defeat, according to the club's Annual Report, was "due to our players having an off-day". The team certainly did not do itself justice in a comprehensive defeat by one of the leading clubs in the country at that time (0-34).

The opinion of some was that worse followed on a visit to Beacon Park. Exeter possibly suffering a reaction to the cup exit lost to Plymouth Albion who thereby avenged a defeat earlier in the season (10-19).

Back at home confidence was boosted when a win over Devonport Services was accomplished although a correspondent described Services as "surely one of the weakest teams on Exeter's fixture list". Exeter ran in five tries (29-3). Having lost the last three games at the Portway against Birmingham, Exeter might have thought that luck was not with them again when the home side took an immediate lead with a dropped goal, but Exeter soon equalised and then scored two tries by half-time. After the resumption the home team was mainly confined to its own half of the field as Exeter added another try (21-6).

The rearranged home tie in the Devon Cup saw Exeter account for Barnstaple (19-6). Two home games over the Easter period both ended in victory - Universities Athletic Union (10-6) and Glamorgan Wanderers (12-8). Away in London, Exeter was clearly the better side in a match against

Streatham-Croydon but, because of many mistakes made by the backs, it was only in the final minute of the game that a clear lead was established (18-9).

Competitive rugby then returned to the Country Ground for two matches. In the first, a Devon Cup semi-final, Exeter just edged past Plymouth Albion in a low scoring game (6-3). The Merit Table meeting with Falmouth was altogether different. After the last gasp win at Falmouth, Exeter now welcomed an injury hit Cornish team. The result was a massacre. Exeter was “able to cut through the Falmouth defence like a hot knife through butter” scoring fifteen tries in all, five of them touched down by winger Steve Williams (76-0). The following day a visit to Barnstaple brought another victory (21-11).

The Devon Cup Final at the County Ground found Exeter facing Sidmouth for a David and Goliath encounter. Sidmouth had nothing to lose and played extremely well. At one stage the underdogs has Exeter rattled when, after being a dozen points down the team pulled back to within two of their opponents. In the end the greater skill and experience of Exeter won the day (28-13). Exeter players felt dissatisfied with their performance when visitors Esher were defeated in a high scoring game. After being behind twice Exeter’s “points rush came in the last fifteen minutes” (40-25).

As the end of season approached there were still significant matches to be played that would decide placings in the South-West Merit Table and entry into the next John Player Cup. Bristol came to Exeter on a Wednesday evening with a fully representative team that needed a victory to ensure qualification. What they met was described by Paul Huddart in the Express & Echo as “a black menace in the form of 15 sweat-soaked heroes” and when Bristol threatened to take control “the black mass engulfed them to turn optimism into a well deserved victory”. This was another match that was long talked about about in the Exeter club house.

After ten minutes hooker John Locker injured a leg and limped through the remainder of the game and later Andy Cole had to have a head wound bandaged. Despite these handicaps the tenacious spirit of the Exeter pack was something the Bristol eight could not match. After falling behind early on, Exeter led at half-time. Bristol struggled desperately and managed to close the gap. A Steve Webb penalty took Exeter clear again and a Bristol penalty came too late to affect the result (15-12). This was Exeter’s first win over Bristol since April 1968. In the Annual Report, the match was singled out for mention. “One of the high-lights of the season was our convincing win over Bristol following a very fast and exciting game”.

The result meant that Exeter qualified for the following season’s John Player Cup Competition and Bristol did not. Post match comment heard in the club-house voiced by Bristol officials was that a club of Bristol’s standing should have automatic inclusion in the competition and should not have to qualify. This view did not receive much sympathy from the Exeter supporters. “A Blow to Bristol’s Pride and Pocket” ran a headline in The Times.

With the pressure off, thirty-one players and officials headed to France for two match week-end tour. A Saturday meeting with Stade Natais Université proved to be the closer of the games played. Skipper Jon Jenkins pulled a leg muscle, an injury that ended his season. Exeter managed to register three tries (20-8). On the Sunday, the party travelled to Rennes, Exeter’s twin city. The team they faced was a Regional Selection from clubs in the area. Exeter found themselves trailing by five points at half-time but then asserted their authority with Phil Arbourne scoring four out of a total of eight tries. Injuries again played a part. Milford was injured and Staddon took-over at scrum-half. Flanker Hartley was also injured. He was replaced by prop Paul Baxter who was suffering from blisters after the previous game. The gallant prop played the last quarter of the match wearing suede shoes. “Un beau match d’entrainement somme toute” was the local verdict (45-13).

The final Saturday of the season involved a trip to Kingsholm without the injured Jenkins and Lockyer but with what was still a strong team. In a later review of the game Gloucester admitted they were given a hard struggle before emerging as victors (0-12).

Inevitably in such a successful season Exeter players were in demand at county and more senior levels. Six players represented Devon and Fred Hartley appeared for Somerset in County Championship matches. In addition to being captain of Devon, John Lockyer led the South-West side in regional trial games. Chris Mills, the quiet man in Exeter's much vaunted front row, also appeared in a trial and was a reserve for another. Elsewhere former Exeter player, John Scott, played in all of England's international matches.

Team spirit was also high throughout as demonstrated by the return of Paul Baxter after a career threatening knee-ligament injury and other players completing games after suffering on field accidents and injury. Perhaps the best illustration of this spirit was shown by centre Dick Packer who travelled 250 miles from Sussex and back again when playing each week.

Despite first team calls the "A" XV showed improvement winning twenty games and losing fifteen. The "B" did even better winning twenty-one games, drawing one and losing only five. The Colts had a disappointing record winning only eight and drawing two of twenty-nine games played.