

114th Year 1985-6

Not only was the committee faced with resolving the problems encountered on the playing field the previous season, but the fixture list had to be revised as well. The Rugby Football Union had given permission for the formation of a National Merit Table C. Initially Exeter had been excluded as fixture criteria were not met, but by the start of the season this issue had been resolved and the club took its place among the twelve forming Merit Table C. The new system was to be run for one season only, but the format continued and evolved into National Divisions.

Exeter's participation in the South West Merit Table continued.

The daunting task of leading the club in what was likely to be another difficult season fell on the shoulders of Graham Bess, a back-row forward who had joined the club from Sidmouth at the start of the 1981-2 season.

After an expected early defeat at home by Gloucester (13-36), there were some promising signs when, at the end of September, three consecutive games were won at the County Ground – Launceston (19-4), Devon & Cornwall Police (17-6) and Camborne (18-4). October however emphasised the task the club still faced.

A visit to Nottingham ended with a heavy defeat (0-64). A week later visitors Okehampton again proved to be a stumbling block (6-10). Exeter then played host to Saracens and another heavy defeat was suffered (3-41). Three days later a recovery was made when visitors Brixham were eliminated from the Devon Cup competition by a narrow margin (10-7). Still with home advantage, Exeter achieved another far from convincing win against Crediton. Taking a six point lead in the first minute of the game, by means of a try from full-back Brett Mugford, the home side could score no more points during the remainder of the match. Ten minutes from the end of the game Crediton scored a try but could not add the extra points and Exeter held out (6-4).

November began with the club's opening fixture in Merit Table C – a visit to Nuneaton. The outcome was, in the usual understated fashion of club chairman John Stark, "a very moderate start" (3-15). A home defeat by Tiverton showed that Exeter, with four players on county duty, still had a hill to climb (13-16) and the month ended with further defeats. Bath enjoyed a "bonanza" running in eleven tries at the County Ground without a reply of any kind (0-57).

A week-end tour started with another heavy defeat at Liverpool (3-46). The following day Exeter faced Vale of Lune for a Merit Table C match. Although defeated Exeter did show promise of improvement, especially by the forwards (0-17). "The Exeter XV returned in good spirits from their Northern week-end" according to the following week's club programme.

The improvement was reinforced with a home win against Walsall (28-16) but could not be maintained as both Plymouth Albion (3-10) and Metropolitan Police (13-24) were successful at the County Ground. However Exeter recovered some ground after Christmas. For the last Saturday of the year "The weather destroyed the first-class rugby programme almost completely" according to The Sunday Times. Only one game was completed, Exeter's home meeting with Birmingham and Exeter gained its only win of the season in a Merit Table C encounter (3-0)!

In the New Year the biggest win of the season was recorded when Redruth came to call. The score should have been higher as Exeter scored eight tries without converting any (32-8).

This performance was followed by a vital win in a Devon Cup match over Torquay Athletic. "Well done lads!" wrote Chairman Stark. Exeter, at home, failed to take full advantage of the wind in the first period and only went ahead with a Peter Drewett try on the stroke of half time. The teams traded

a penalty apiece in the second half and Exeter hung on for the final quarter of an hour when any score by the visitors would have taken them through to the next round as a drawn game would see the visitors go through (10-7).

The remaining matches in January and February brought a mixed set of results with some encouraging signs. A Friday night home defeat at the Memorial Ground by Bristol was no disgrace (0-34), but the result at home against Bridgwater & Albion four days later was said to be “disappointing” (10-19). A hastily arranged home fixture with Rugby brought a much needed victory and the home meeting with Nottingham ended in a close call for the visitors. In contrast to the sixty-four point margin of defeat in the early season game, Exeter reduced the deficit in this game to a single point (6-7).

The weather then intervened for two weeks and then, when most other games in the country were cancelled, the only senior game played saw Exeter defeat Weston super Mare at the County Ground despite the forwards “disjointed struggle against a much lesser pack” (9-7). At home, against a powerful South Wales Police team, according to Paul Easterbrook of the Express & Echo, “Exeter gave a display that offered some hope, but probably gave more alarm” for an upcoming Devon Cup meeting with Devonport Services. The home forwards improved their game, but some weak tackling allowed the talented Police team to ease to victory (13-42).

Away from home, Exeter then managed to defeat Devonport Services in a cup tie (20-7), but the Devon Cup run was later halted by Plymouth Albion at Beacon Park (6-15). In between these games away defeats were experienced at Morley (16-23) and Camborne (3-17). Beginning with the match at Morley, Exeter lost ten out of the final eleven fixtures of the season.

At the end of March the club’s poor standing in Devon club rugby was reinforced by defeat away from home by Torquay Athletic who took “sweet revenge” for the cup defeat in January (4-20). There was only one substantial defeat in the final month – at Gloucester (0-64). Other defeats came from the following matches - Sheffield (9-27), Maesteg (6-14), Bristol (0-30), Northampton (13-28) and Roundhay - a Merit Table C game played on the first Saturday in May (11-22). The solitary victory came in a home game against Tredegar (16-14).

Although there were signs of promise the club ended the season at the foot of the South West Merit Table, having won only one game out of ten played, and next to bottom in Merit Table C (above Nuneaton), having won one game out of eight. Coach Bob Staddon would have been fully aware of the task ahead of him and his coaching staff.