

125th Year 1996-7

This was a significant season in the history of the club, both on and off the field.

Following a decision of the International Rugby Board in the summer of 1995, the Rugby Football Union had opened its doors to professionalism. The Exeter club was not yet in a position to embrace the new professional ethos in its entirety, but the Honorary Secretary, Brian "Tug" Wilson, was appointed as Chief Executive. The club's first paid official, he was charged with the task of increasing the club's commercial and fund-raising activities.

Initially the club decided to aid players with expenses, to defray the costs of playing kit and travelling. Then discussions began regarding signing on fees and the award of contracts to the first team squad members to come into effect for the 1997-8 season. In the interim Exeter was described as a semi-professional outfit, attracting players who wanted to combine a working career with playing competitive rugby. One such recruit was ex-Bristol No.8 Bob Armstrong who was then enticed to join Plymouth Albion. He was then persuaded to re-join Exeter and play a critical role in the club's success.

Promotion to National Division 3 required the club to play 30 league games. This commitment together with matches to be played in national cup competitions meant that the club, reluctantly, withdrew its senior side from the Devon Cup competition. Instead, the second stream, known as Exeter United, filled the vacancy. It had been said that Exeter United was possibly the second strongest team in the south-west!

The only non-competitive game of the season took place in January when Penryn agreed to play a hastily arranged match following six blank Saturdays for Exeter.

Despite the pressures on both players and committee, Exeter exceeded the hopes of many by becoming Champions of League 2 at the first attempt, thereby gaining promotion to the second tier of the game in England.

As befits a game played at the end of August, Exeter opened the new campaign against Rosslyn Park at the County Ground, in cricket weather. Playing exciting open rugby, the home side ran in seven tries (47-6). The bright start was continued at Wharfedale where Exeter won despite having to play with fourteen men from early in the game, after debutant Del Cross had been sent off (29-17). Success continued at Walsall where the final score belied a tight game (35-11).

At home against Harrogate, Exeter's style of rucking did not meet with the referee's approval and it took a hat-trick of tries from winger Simon Dovell to see the team home (22-7). The first defeat of the season came at Leeds, where the home club took advantage of a couple of Exeter errors to score breakaway tries that negated a fine first half performance by the visitors (28-33). Just at the time when fortune appeared to be on the wane, luck came Exeter's way in the defeat of London Welsh at the County Ground. The home team, leading by a single point, conceded a penalty deep into injury time. The long-range goal attempt struck a post but stayed out (18-17). The following week at Lydney, Exeter ended the Gloucestershire club's two year unbeaten home league run with "a polished performance" (24-12).

Redruth came to the County Ground still seeking a first league victory against Exeter, who contained an early onslaught from the visitors before scoring two tries in as many minutes. Strict refereeing and injuries meant that Exeter, although winning with ease, did not run riot as might have been expected. No.8 Bob Armstrong registered a hat-trick of tries (44-0).

Following this success, a second league defeat came at Morley where Exeter was well beaten. No tries were scored and the only points came from the boot of Andy Green (9-19). However any worries about the club's form were dispelled in the next two matches.

Exeter entered the Powergen Cup at the 3rd round stage. Drawn at home to Barnstaple, the North Devon side was duly defeated, though the performance was not particularly convincing (32-3). A much more decisive result was achieved on the resumption of league activities against visiting Clifton. Exeter ran in ten tries setting a league record score and winning margin (71-0).

If the victory against Clifton represented a high spot then Exeter was to enter the two lowest points of the season. Away to Fylde, league leaders at the time, the club suffered “a bad day for the back row”. John Batchelor was sent off and Nick Southern was injured. Full back Jon Fabian scored a try and kicked two penalties but the game was lost (11-26).

After the game had been postponed a week, because Exeter players were representing Western Counties against an Argentina XV, the club faced Kendal, a team occupying a mid-table position in National Four North. The home crowd was disappointed to witness an off-form Exeter display and the only home defeat of the season. The Kendal players thoroughly deserved their victory. It was also a sad day for back-rower Mike Cathery, in his final appearance for the club after eighteen years’ service through good and bad times (12-18).

Provisional plans for a training camp in either Jersey or Cork in December had been made, but projected costs proved too high for the club in the new professional era.

Only one game was played in December, a home encounter with Havant. Returning to the senior team, Simon Dovell scored four tries “as Havant crumbled” (46-5). Freezing weather then took a hand and three consecutive league matches had to be postponed. When the weather began to ease in the south-west, a game at Penryn was hastily arranged. Gratitude was expressed to the Cornish club for playing a game that enable players to get some much needed match practice (67-7).

However, a week later, at Roehampton, despite their efforts in Cornwall, Exeter was “caught cold” by Rosslyn Park who inflicted the club’s biggest defeat of the season (10-36). Potential promotion seemed a long way off. This view was reinforced a week later against visitors Wharfedale. Exeter won, but only narrowly, as a late dropped goal by Jason Thomas eased the tension. Thomas had earlier scored the home team’s only try (14-8). Even more nail-biting was the next game at home against Walsall who deployed spoiling tactics to deny Exeter scoring chances by the backs (24-22).

Another poor performance, this time at Harrogate, against a team they would have expected to beat, saw Exeter slipping to a fifth league defeat – but it was to be the last of the season (12-15).

The next game, against Leeds at the County Ground, was, according to a match programme, “targeted as an essential win if we were to maintain a challenge”. The game duly lived up to its billing. “This was a cracking third division game which saw the lead change hands five times” wrote The Times correspondent. Eventual victory was due to “a storming performance” by the back-row trio of Dixon, Armstrong and Batchelor, who not only restricted Leeds attacking potential but also created space for the Exeter backs. Andy Green kicked sixteen points including a last minute penalty that earned his team a one point victory (26-25).

Another targeted game followed, against London Welsh at Old Deer Park, and again the back row was prominent in what the club described as a “workmanlike” display. The margin of victory stood in contrast to that at the County Ground in October (36-15). Back at home, Exeter was said “to be in overdrive” during an early kick-off game with Lydney, scoring nine tries (60-9). At the Rec, despite a stubborn performance Redruth was still unable to break its Exeter jinx (31-18).

At home against Morley another tight game was won through the kicking skills of Andy Green who landed a late penalty goal (26-24). On its home ground, Clifton resisted for a while before being hit by another Exeter onslaught that led to nine tries and a record away win (60-3).

The away meeting with Liverpool St. Helens, postponed in December, took place at Easter. The home side led three times before Exeter scored a try five minutes from time (25-18). A large crowd gathered at the County Ground for the visit of Fylde, the current league leaders. Prospects were not promising at half time when Exeter trailed on the score-board and were about to face the wind. However, a “superb second-half fight-back” saw Fylde conceding penalties. Green found the mark seven times to score all Exeter’s points (21-13).

At Havant Exeter hit top form for an hour and scored six tries (36-8). Back home Exeter continued its successful run with an emphatic victory over Liverpool St. Helens. The home crowd acknowledged each of two solo late tries from 40 metres by the visiting scrum-half with a standing ovation (45-14).

Exeter had to rely on the forwards to win the game at Otley where the backs struggled. No.8 Iain Dixon was driven over for a hat-trick of tries (26-14). Because of earlier match postponements the season was extended into May to complete the league programme. Exeter welcomed Reading to the County Ground for the first ever meeting between the two clubs. Needing to win all three remaining games to ensure promotion, Exeter began nervously in front of a 2,600 strong crowd. Reading took the lead with a penalty but gradually the home pack got the better of the large visiting eight and enabled the backs to score three tries. Reading battled bravely but two serious injuries disrupted their efforts (30-16). Another victory, against Otley preserved Exeter’s unbeaten home league record. “Giving away three late tries removes a little of the shine” said Paul Easterbrook in the Express & Echo (48-19).

Exeter now need to win the last game of the season, against Reading at Sonning, to ensure the title of league champions. Anticipation of success was high in the city and on the day six official coaches left the County Ground bound for Reading. It was estimated that some 500 supporters swelled the crowd.

After a nervous start, Exeter began to assert superiority but scoring opportunities were denied by poor handing. Then, on a rare foray into Exeter territory, Reading took the lead with a dropped goal just after the thirty minute mark. A well-engineered try scored by Sean Doyle gave Exeter a deserved half-time lead. After the resumption two penalty goals from Jon Fabian gave Exeter a ten point lead. Reading needed two scores but as Exeter resumed control, the home team’s frustration was met with a yellow card near the end. At the final whistle Exeter players, officials and supporters gathered on the pitch in celebration of the team’s championship winning performance (13-3).

In 1995 a club goal was set to achieve Premier League 1 status in five years. With promotion in two successive seasons, the aim seemed to be well on course, but it took 13 seasons to break through to the top flight. Once there, it took Exeter only seven seasons to win the Premiership Final and only another three to become Champions of Europe and also to regain the domestic title.