

127th Year 1998-9

Another significant season on the road to full professionalism saw the introduction of the club's first full-time professional coach.

The club had become an incorporated body during the 1997-8 period when Tony Rowe, who had first been approached to explore the possibility of his company, SW Comms, becoming main sponsor of the club in 1993, was appointed Managing Director. During 1998 Tony Rowe, Steve Byrne and John Baxter drew up a short list of candidates for the post of professional coach.

On June 1st the new appointee, Ian Bremner 47, officially signed a three-year contract. As a player he had appeared for Ulster as a hooker and had gained coaching experience with Cardiff, Ireland Under 21 and the Swedish national side among others.

Former head coach, Paul Westgate, left to pursue his career in the teaching profession.

After an August opening friendly at home with Rosslyn Park that Exeter scraped through (12-11), Bremner's first major test was to come at home a week later when Bristol, who had been relegated from the top flight the previous season, provided the first opposition of the new league season. The score-line suggests a tight contest but Exeter had to rely on five penalty goals from new fly-half Bryan Easson to answer the Bristol score that included three tries (15-22). The reality of playing in a stronger league was emphasised on a visit to Rotherham. This time Exeter did manage to score two tries to their opponents three but had to admit defeat by eleven points (17-28).

After this low-key start, Exeter then rattled off three victories in a row to raise club spirits. At the County Ground, Coventry matched the home team try for try but 16 points from Easson's boot eased the club home (31-25). A trip to Yorkshire to face Wakefield saw another closely fought game with the visitors gaining the spoils at the end of play (27-19). Back at home Exeter found Moseley a slightly easier nut to crack, registering three tries by the backs (20-8). Former Exeter assistant coach, Keith Hatter, was in charge of the visitors. Although complying with the regulation for announcing team squads 45 minutes before kick-off, Ian Bremner sought to confuse Hatter by issuing a team sheet with the correct names but not necessarily in their correct playing positions.

The run of successes came to an abrupt end at Worcester where the home club ran in four tries against two close range efforts from Exeter, emphasising the differing strengths of teams in the second division (15-40). This gulf was further illustrated at the County Ground a week later when facing the confident Waterloo club, Exeter virtually reversed the score-line of the previous week. The outcome was not as the visitors intended as, in the words of the Liverpool Echo correspondent, "Waterloo's climb up the Allied Dunbar second division table came to a shuddering halt when they lost their way in a nightmare first half and found themselves 36-0 down". Full-back Jon Fabian helped himself to four touchdowns in this period. Against the wind, Exeter battened down the hatches. The visitors managed to score two converted tries but skipper Rob Baxter added Exeter's seventh try just before the final whistle (41-14).

The two following games were much tighter affairs. At the County Ground Leeds matched the home team's two penalty goals, but the visitor's try went unconverted whereas the straight forward conversion of a penalty try awarded to the home team provided the winning margin (13-11). At Fylde the home team did match Exeter score for score for the game to end in a draw. Exeter's two tries both came via the pack (26-26).

November began with a second home defeat of the season, this time at the hands of Rugby Lions. The Midlands belied their lowly league position and scored eight points before James Alvis scored a

typical close range try that Easson converted at the end of the first half. Exeter scored no further points whilst Rugby added two more tries and fifteen point in all (7-23).

The next two games could hardly have provided a greater contrast in scoring terms. Exeter entered the Tetley Bitter Cup at the 4th Round and was to face the Shropshire club Whitchurch in a home tie. Exeter ran in thirteen tries by eight different players. The visitors stuck to the task and did manage a consolation try of their own (81-11). If Exeter's concentration on league matters had relaxed, it went unrecorded, when, a week later, at Old Deer Park, London Welsh ran in ten tries to swamp the visitors. It was not all one-way traffic as Exeter did reply with five tries of its own (27-62).

A new competition, the Cheltenham & Gloucester Cup, then entered the Rugby Union calendar. The first round was a two legged affair with clubs playing home and away against each other on consecutive week-ends. Exeter won the away tie against opponents Worcester scoring five tries, all of which came from the forwards (31- 17). In the home tie Exeter scored only one try (again from a forward) to match the one touched down by Worcester, but Easson's boot provided the winning points (16-8) to allow Exeter entry into the second round.

Returning attention to Division 2 games, Exeter, at home, saw off the challenge of Blackheath (26-7) before travelling north to face Orrell. Exeter managed to squeeze a two point victory despite the home side scoring two tries to the visitor's one. The winning margin came by courtesy of a conversion that hit the woodwork and went over. In the opinion of the local press the real difference was "an overzealous referee" whose decisions were responsible for Orrell having to play with thirteen men for twenty minutes (23-21).

After a break at Christmas, Exeter began the New Year with a home game against London Welsh, hopeful of revenge for the heavy defeat earlier in the season. Sadly victory just eluded the home club who reduced the margin of defeat to just a single point (16-17). The squad then travelled to Nottingham for a 4th Round Tetley Bitter Cup tie where victory came with something to spare (24-8).

League action was resumed with a comfortable victory at home over Fylde with Richard Baxter scoring a hat trick of tries (42-10). A much sterner encounter was to follow in the form of a 5th Round tie of the Tetley Bitter Cup against Premiership side Richmond, at the Madejski Stadium. For the first half hour Exeter contained the Richmond attack but then had to concede two quick tries, so the home side led by twelve points at the interval. Exeter's attacking options were limited and it was not until after Richmond had compiled thirty points that Exeter, playing to its strength, scored a try through hooker Phil John who was bundled over by the pack after five minutes of scrummaging on the opposition line. Richmond then added a further try before the end (10-37).

Exeter failed to bounce back as the next league encounter saw another heavy defeat, this time by Leeds who, on their own ground, ran in seven tries to one by the visitors (7-44). What might have been a difficult away trip did see a return to winning ways against Waterloo where Exeter won right on the stroke of no-side (13-11).

By co-incidence, Exeter had to make the same trip a week later to fulfil a 2nd Round C&G Cup game. Falling behind to an early converted try, the visitors were not able to catch their no frills opponents (13-25).

The next three league games served to illustrate how well matched the mid-table teams were. At the County Ground, Exeter just managed to get the better of Worcester, scoring three tries to one by the visitors who were also awarded a penalty try (27-23). The score at Moseley was even closer. Two tries from plus five points from Easson were enough to top four penalty goals from Moseley (15-12). Exeter then lost to Rugby for the second time in the season. The teams were all-square at the interval

but, on the resumption, whilst Exeter could manage only further penalty goals, the home side scored two tries, who win the match (9-13).

At home to Wakefield, Exeter scored five tries against a sole effort by the visitors. Wing Mark Woodman and flanker Gary Willis both claimed a brace (37-23). Defeat at Coventry followed. Both sides scored two tries but the home teams kicking proved to be decisive (13-20). At Rectory Field Exeter scored seven tries to four by Blackheath (41-26).

The last two games in April made the task of what Exeter needed to achieve to make the top flight quite clear. Bristol and Rotherham topped the pile while Exeter stood mid-table. Rotherham came to the County Ground and, although the margin of difference between the team was only eleven points, the visitors touched down five tries, Exeter could manage only two, from Mark Woodman and skipper Rob Baxter (24-45). At Bristol the game was virtually over by half-time when the home side held a twenty-eight point lead. Exeter did make a comeback but it was not nearly enough (17-36).

For the final game of the season Exeter played host to Orrell. Fielding a side that contained only two players over the age of 25, Orrell were twice on level terms. The visiting press thought their side unlucky to have a try disallowed while Exeter “were given the benefit of the doubt over two dubious tries”. Prop Wayne Reed claimed three of Exeter’s five tries (42-32).

The final table showed Exeter in fifth position having won fourteen games and drawing another. Leeds, who were placed 6th actually won sixteen games but had four points deducted for a breach of the regulations.