

108th Year 1979-0

Although the playing record was only slightly inferior to that of the previous season, 1979-0 was described in the Annual Report as being satisfactory as it was “not as successful as one might have hoped”. It was acknowledged that the fixtures continued to improve with the result that “winning becomes a much harder process”. More victories were required to justify the stronger fixtures and to keep them. The strength of the team lay with the forwards, ably led by skipper Tim Woodrow in his second year in office. Paul Baxter was now officially made club coach. From 44 games played victory came on twenty-three occasions and three matches were drawn.

The first three Saturday fixtures had a strong Welsh flavour. On the opening day Exeter welcomed London Welsh for the first meeting of the two clubs since September 1964. There had been a series of nine games since 1946 of which Exeter had won but once - in January 1947. Starved of possession for the first twenty-five minutes, Exeter had to rely on excellent defensive cover to keep London Welsh at bay. The visitors eventually went ahead but Exeter replied with two opportunist tries before Woodrow had to leave the field at a critical time. It was only in the last ten minutes that the Welsh broke through for the winning score (10-16).

According to programme notes compiler Terry Davies, the game against Maesteg “could and should have been won”. In the skipper’s words “the game slipped away from us. We were guilty of making too many errors”. Attacking play only just failed to produce the single additional score needed to win (13-14). A week later Pontypridd presented a much more difficult proposition. The Welsh side had not visited the County Ground since April 1904 when Exeter won. By the time of its return Pontypridd was ranked among the leading clubs in the Principality and was, by the end of the game, thought to be “the best side that has been to Exeter for some years”. The ensuing defeat was comprehensive, though the club strongly disagreed with the press view that the outcome was a “massacre”. After falling behind, Exeter did manage to stage a come-back in the second half (17-34).

For the fourth home Saturday match in succession Exeter faced Sidcup with two debutants in the team that was bolstered by the return of “veteran” Bob Staddon. The full-back supplied 15 points from his 100% accurate kicking but the final score should have been more had the team “not gone off the boil in the second half” when only one try was registered. (27-0).

The first away game of the season came on the last Saturday in September – a Merit Table meeting at Camborne. With three leading players under suspension the Cornish club did not fancy their chances but a Ross Salmon headline summed up the outcome of the game – “Underdogs top dogs”. Taking advantage of the conditions Camborne outplayed Exeter in basic skills. “We have only ourselves to blame” said Woodrow. Exeter held a seven point lead at half-time but scored no more as Camborne took advantage of a strong wind blowing down the pitch (7-23).

With confidence having taken a knock, the team travelled Bedford to face a large pack and a keen set of three-quarters. Exeter offered plenty of effort but was well beaten come the end of the game (9-23). For the next match, at home to Devonport Services, seven first choice players were absent representing Devon. The replacements acquitted themselves well and a welcome victory was the outcome whilst confidence received an overdue boost (18-3). Still at home Exeter faced Saracens in a game that could have gone either way. “At last a bit of form” said the skipper. Exeter could have won but a last minute penalty from Bob Staddon was just off target (9-9).

After a week off, when the County Ground staged a Devon match in the County Championship, Exeter welcomed Richmond. The home side was weakened by unavailability, injury and illness to such an extent that Terry Davies was moved to call the team “a Skeleton XV”. Exeter was well and truly beaten after cracking under pressure (9-46).

On the next County Championship day Exeter welcomed Tiverton to the County Ground. Victory was achieved but the visitors often exposed weaknesses in a pedestrian home defence. Aided by the award of a penalty try, Exeter took the honours. “A win is a win!” said the club programme (28-16). Clem Davies emerged from retirement to play in this game in place of Rod Battershill who had been injured in a motor-cycle accident. Davies continued to play for the remainder of the season.

Playing away from home for only the third time in the season so far, Exeter then defeated Bridgwater & Albion in a mid-week match. "It was a poor game" said the captain's report (11-6). Back at home three days later the Exeter team gave its best performance to date against St. Ives. With a number of key players still absent the forwards laid the foundation for victory with a stream of possession for the backs. When scrum-half Kevin Sumner had to go off the versatile Bob Staddon took his place "with great skill" (30-0).

Maidstone, in its centenary year, made a first visit to the County Ground and benefitted from some over-elaborate play by the home team. After scoring three quick tries, "Exeter relaxed, trying to indulge in fancy play which resulted in more mistakes than threat to the Maidstone defence". In the second half the forwards took a more direct approach, adding two more tries (27-16). Still in attacking mode Exeter went to the Recreation Ground and outgunned Torquay Athletic, scoring 24 points in the first half hour. Seven tries were scored in all, five by the backs, with Steve Williams touching down three of them, and two by the forwards. Royal Marine Commando Steve Hughes scored a memorable solo try after a run of forty yards (34-7).

Mid-week Exeter went to play Clifton for the first time at the club's new ground at Cribbs Causeway. Under the floodlights the Exeter team continued its scoring spree despite six changes being made to the side that had played the previous Saturday. Bob Staddon again had to take over at scrum-half during the game (31-0). Birmingham then came to the County Ground missing five players on county duty and proved to be no match for a now confident Exeter side. No.8 Steve Hughes played a prominent part in the victory, scoring two tries in the second half. The backs again tended to over-elaborate when a more direct approach might have taken the score to fifty points (35-7).

After a run of seven straight victories Exeter would have had high hopes of extending the run at home to Metropolitan Police. It was not to be. In a low scoring game the visitors edged out the home side by two points (4-6). New ground was broken when Exeter visited Tredegar for the first time and winning ways were resumed with a narrow victory (18-17). On Boxing Day Exmouth were defeated at the Imperial Ground (26-6). A more important victory was gained on the last Saturday of the year. At Beacon Park, Plymouth Albion were defeated in a South-West Merit Table game (14-3). After a brilliant short career with Exeter, Steve Hughes was playing his last game for the club because the Royal Marines had posted him to Deal in Kent.

The first Saturday of 1980 saw Exeter travelling to Stradey Park for the first time since February 1935 to meet Llanelli. The two clubs had last met in 1947. The home team had been stripped of eight players who were required to join the Wales national squad. Exeter had to make three late changes from the selected XV. Although defeated Exeter earned a lot of respect from the crowd that was said to number 4,000. A Llanelli official commented: "We won all the ball and you played all the football". With wind advantage Exeter actually led at half time and it was not until late in the game, when a second try was scored, that Llanelli looked certain to win (3-13).

At home against Clifton, Exeter won comfortably with former Sidmouth captain, Steve Lewis, making an impressive debut. The following week a meeting with Bristol under lights at the Memorial Ground had to be cancelled because of the weather, an ideal opportunity to prepare for a John Player Cup meeting with Rosslyn Park thereby being lost.

For the second year running Exeter was due to meet Rosslyn Park at Roehampton in the John Player competition. Having suffered a fright from Exeter in the competition the previous season, Park fielded, in the words of Tim Woodrow, "A very large pack with inches to spare totally intent from the word go". The home pack applied constant pressure and the tactics paid off (7-24).

Competitive rugby continued for Exeter with a home Merit Table meeting with Cornish Champions Camborne. Terry Davies described it as "an uninspiring game" whilst the captain commented that "Camborne's tactics of win at all costs proved fruitless". Two Camborne players were sent off whilst Exeter stuck to the task in hand and won (16-0). After a blank Saturday Exeter scraped past Weston super Mare (6-3). A mid-week Merit Table match followed but this time Exeter went under to Bristol

at the Memorial Ground. A few players were unavailable for this game one of whom was Bob Staddon who had, according to the Bristol programme, contracted chicken-pox (12-26).

The next game at Cheltenham had been arranged for a morning kick-off due to the Wales v England international taking place at Cardiff in the afternoon. The club-game was an ill-tempered affair which Exeter managed to win without too much effort (14-0). Both sides assembled to watch the international on T.V. in the club-house. The game gained notoriety for the sending off of a Welsh forward, an incident that drew a voluminous out-burst from Exeter's Welsh-born stand-off Steve Webb!

Prospects for the remainder of the season did not look good when the team put in "a totally inept performance" when losing to Exeter University (?-?). Fortunately an immediate remedy was found a week later when Plymouth Albion was defeated in a Devon Cup match at Beacon Park. The performance was said to have been a "professional" job. Albion, whose forwards contained the Exeter pack, did themselves no favours. Two of their players were sent off, one for a second high tackle and the other, late in the game for "a vicious late tackle". Phil Loder and Simon Day scored the tries and Peter Full kicked the goals (13-3).

Fortunes dipped again at Nottingham where Exeter, after leading for most of the game, fell in the final stages (12-16). There was similar pattern to the play at the County Ground in a Merit Table game against Gloucester. Exeter was in with a chance of winning right up to the final minutes when a late dropped goal by the visitors left the home team too much to do to catch up (3-10). Terry Davies commented that the game was played in an almost Cathedral like silence as many spectators had stayed away to watch England win the Five Nations championship on television.

After a rest of three days Exeter then took the field again to face Sidmouth in the final of the Devon Cup at the County Ground. In the words of Tim Woodrow the game "was typical of local Cup matches with the favourites cruising to an early lead, weathering the storm that followed from the underdogs and sewing up the game with a couple of good tries". For all their enthusiasm the Sidmouth players were undone by two late injuries that caused disruption to their organisation. Terry Davies was not impressed by the Exeter performance. "The Club will have to play a lot better than they did against Sidmouth" (22-12).

Two competitive games on the trot were followed by another three in a row. Three Merit Table matches were to be played, all at home. In the first encounter with Plymouth Albion both teams played with caution. As a result the standard of play was poor almost leading to a stalemate but in the end Exeter just managed to overcome the visitors (15-12). Against Bath, Exeter was able to keep the opposition in check but the skills of visiting England fly-half John Horton engineered a victory for his team (4-19). Against Bristol the following Tuesday, Exeter led by six points to nil at one stage but then fell away (6-21).

Easter found Exeter enjoying some relief from the pressure of competition games. Saturday's visitors from Cheshire, Wilmslow, found Exeter in attacking mood (29-4) whilst Otley, on a first visit, managed to hold the home side, who were fielding an almost wholly reserve team, to a draw (11-11). The respite was all too short. Thursday was the appointed date for the Devon Cup Final.

Cup holders Torquay Athletic came to the County Ground for what turned to be a typical final which was, according to press-man Bill Fenwick, "although energetic and rumbustious, not a classic cup final". Kick-off had to be delayed for fifteen minutes because the referee had been held up by traffic. Once on the field he stamped his authority on the game by awarding two penalties to each side for dangerous play. The score remained at six points all for fifty minutes during which time Steve Webb missed five kicks at goal. It took a well organised drop goal from Bob Staddon to break the deadlock. Webb went on to score the only try of the game (18-6). Back-row forward Jeremy Macklin was

proclaimed Man of the Match, though several observers thought Graham Milford more deserving of the award.

Aberavon, on tour, had to borrow a couple of Torquay Athletic players to complete a team for a match at the County Ground. Exeter also suffered absences that included the skipper. Nevertheless the pack played with “great vigour” and young Mike Cathery, who had moved up from the back row to take his captain’s place, was singled out for an honourable mention. Aberavon, according to one of their committee, was “pushed all over the park”. At this point Exeter had played nine home games in succession within a month. It was as well that spring time in 1980 was dry weather-wise.

A two match tour to Ireland was enjoyed by all the travelling party though the two games played, against Greystones and Monkstown, both ended in defeat.

On returning home Exeter had to travel to Kingsholm for the final Merit Table match of the season. As the table stood, if Gloucester lost by more than four points then they would not qualify for the following season’s John Player. As David Hands of The Times put it “the unthinkable remained unthought” as Gloucester eased home. In the circumstance the home team fielded a side that was only one short of its best selection whereas Exeter were three first choices down, including the captain. Only six points down at half time Exeter eventually succumbed to continuous pressure (12-36).

Some prestige returned when, two days later, Llanelli, visiting the County Ground with a far from full strength team, was “crushed by a cock-a-hoop” Exeter (22-7) but, after another two day interval, Exeter could manage only a draw at Barnstaple (?-?).

Despite calls by the 1st XV, the “A” team had a successful season winning 24 and drawing three games out of 34 played. Less successful was the “B” XV who won 13 and drew one of 21 games played. The Colts were successful in a dozen games but lost 14 and drew two matches.

At the end of the season it was announced that Bob Staddon, “after many years of splendid service” had decided to hang up his boots and join the Committee. He did serve as a committee man but it was not long before his boots were pressed into service again during the next season!