

## 124<sup>th</sup> Year 1995-6

The disappointment of having been relegated was soon replaced by a determination to see the club regain a place in the third tier of English rugby. This aim was achieved when the club finished the season in top place in Division 4. But even this fine achievement had already lost its gloss when, half-way through the season, yet another league reorganisation meant that the top eight teams in Division 4 would all be promoted. Said a club official "Being given something on a plate is never as satisfying as working hard to earn it".

Taking over as captain was 24-year-old Rob Baxter who had made his debut for the club some six seasons earlier. In that same season he won four full England Colts caps and an England "A" cap against Italy. In 1993 he decided to try his luck with Gloucester making a 250 mile round trip to train and play for the Division 1 club. After a season he returned to Exeter.

This season also saw the club return to wearing all black jerseys, following three seasons of wearing white with black piping.

After an opening victory in a non-competitive fixture at Torquay Athletic (27-8), the league season kicked-off with an away game against newly promoted Walsall. The victory was comfortable even though Exeter's goal kickers did not have a good day, landing only a dropped goal and one conversion (25-14). Although described by the club "as a great lift to us all", the opposition was not regarded as amongst the strongest in the league.

A much more challenging contest was forecast for the visit of Leeds to the County Ground. The outcome surprised many who watched what Bill Fenwick, of the Western Morning News, described as "Exeter's demolition of Leeds". He added "it was just what the doctor ordered" for club president John Roach, who was allowed to leave his hospital bed to attend the game. Exeter's approach was to play 15-man rugby and by the end of the game coach Paul Westgate was a contented man, after the trials of the previous season (39-5).

As was now the norm, competition games came thick and fast. At Beacon Park against Plymouth Albion, a change in style of play was evident. In the words of Paul Easterbrook of the Express & Echo, "It was a dour and often untidy local derby with no great pattern or flow". Exeter led by a single point with twenty minutes still to play, then captain Rob Baxter decided to keep the ball tight. The tactics worked and from a blind side move a try was engineered for winger Simon Dovell (25-19). On home soil, Redruth was also beaten by a narrow margin (21-14). Two away wins followed. The first of these was a first round Pilkington Cup game away against Havant (20-11) and the other, a league game versus Aspatria (28-12). Two weeks after their cup meeting Exeter, at home, played Havant in the league and won again, but this time with a little bit more to spare (23-3).

The first defeat of the season came at the end of October when the club travelled to Liverpool St. Helens. Finding themselves ten points in arrears at half-time and seventeen soon after the resumption, Exeter responded by scoring nineteen points of their own, thereby taking the lead. They were defeated three minutes from time by a home team dropped goal from 35-yards (22-23).

Although the outcome of the third round Pilkington Cup tie at home against Redruth provided Exeter with its eighth straight win against the Cornish team, the victory was anything but straightforward. Coach Paul Westgate was concerned that Exeter failed to stamp its authority on the game. Many observers would say that this was a game Redruth threw away rather than Exeter won. The visitors failed with four kicks at goal while Andy Green was on target with four attempts. The home team also had to thank Mark Woodman for a try-saving tackle in the second half (17-15).

Exeter resumed league activity with what the club programme said "was a lack-lustre win up at Clifton" (14-10).

The next four weeks were crammed with seven friendly games, starting with a canter at Birmingham-Solihull (60-5) and followed by a similar win at home against Taunton (42-14). November ended with a reversal of fortune when Coventry, at Coundon Road, heavily defeated an Exeter XV that was giving experience to a number of fringe players (7-64). A stronger team just held the emerging Worcester club on their own ground (26-25) before Exeter played host to Crediton in an unconvincing performance (28-14) and Swanage & Wareham (27-19).

The final game in this sequence came on a bitterly cold Friday at the Recreation Ground, against Bath. After the heavy defeat at Coventry, club officials were heartened by the performance against another premier team who fielded five first team regulars. The effort “showed what can be achieved” said one Exeter source, and “we played some magnificent rugby” said another. Despite the conditions it was a high scoring game. After fifty minutes play the club found itself 21 points in arrears, but retaliated with four tries, two of which came from lock Harry Langley. Bath touched down twice in the second half leaving Exeter seven points adrift (29-36).

Two contrasting cup encounters followed, both at the County Ground. Exmouth was comfortably beaten in the Devon Cup (38-8). Then Leicester came for a 4<sup>th</sup> Round Pilkington Cup tie. The two clubs had faced each other in the same competition two seasons previously at Leicester, but this time there was no repeat of the heavy defeat of the earlier meeting. As was so often the case at the time of year, the game was played on a mud-heap. A crowd of 5,000 gathered hoping to see a repeat of the open game like that against Wasps the previous season. However this time, in murky, muddy conditions Leicester scrummaged and mauled their way to three tries. Exeter, for all the team’s commitment and gallantry, was unable to register a score but did manage to keep the visitor’s total to a respectable level (0-27).

The New Year began with an away meeting with London Welsh, the League leaders at the time. Exeter won, thereby ending a run of 25 unbeaten games played by the Welsh (16-11). Exeter entertained Walsall in a swirling wind and steady rain on a muddy surface, conditions that demanded set piece possession. The line-outs were a lottery but Exeter proved better than the opposition in set scrums. The home side did manage to turn defence into attack for a 60 yard movement that led to a try by Shaun Doyle. “It was a strange sort of game” said Rob Baxter (27-8).

There followed a month free of league action. The strong combination sent to the Memorial Ground to face a weakened Bristol team was found wanting. “Our performance was at best lethargic” commented a club match programme. Although reduced to fourteen players during the game, the coaches still “found it incomprehensible that our players could be so poor” (14-41). February opened with a Devon Cup Quarter Final match at Ivybridge where Exeter started as they had left off at Bristol. “Despite a headless opening fifteen minutes, we eventually settled” and then Exeter controlled the game (47-7). A further win at home, in “awful conditions” on a pitch at Cowick Barton against Moseley, a Division 2 side, indicated “we are back on course and mindful that winning rugby is not only a state of mind” (22-7).

The home league meeting with Plymouth Albion at the County Ground “was a dull affair until the second half when our opponents tired” and Exeter went on to score five tries (39-6). This was followed by a meeting on an extremely wet Redruth pitch where the ball was kept in the pack for much of a game that ended in what was described as “a fine win where the score suggests a much closer game than it actually was” (14-5). The Devon Cup Semi-Final at the County Ground against a spirited Torquay Athletic side was won with ease “after a difficult opening quarter of an hour”. “The referee unfortunately did not allow the game to flow and both sides were frustrated by the whistle”. Even so Exeter scored seven tries for the third match in a row in the competition (43-16).

Then came a second league defeat, away at Leeds. “A disappointing game in which we failed to play to our potential” commented a club programme, adding “It wasn’t until the last few minutes that

Exeter managed to put any concerted pressure on the Leeds line" (11-15). "We played well" in a friendly at Camborne (32-15) but despite what appears to have been an easy win against Aspatia at the County Ground, all was not well. The victory was described as "a false dawn" because for long periods the team "lacked control, confidence and vision" (53-8).

Such criticism seemed to be well founded when, after a mid-week win at Tiverton (26-7), the club, on the point of claiming the league title at Havant, fell to its third league defeat (6-24). It was fortunate that results in games elsewhere meant Exeter still topped the table.

Recovery from this defeat came a week later with the visit of Liverpool St. Helens who had faint hopes of promotion. The visitors found the going tough and Exeter amply avenged the early season defeat (37-11). In similar vein Exeter then defeated Clifton at the County Ground by a similar margin of points (34-8). This victory clinched Exeter's position as Division 4 champions.

Four days later a full strength Exeter team took to the field at Pottington Road to face Barnstaple in the final of the Devon Cup. In previous rounds reserve players had been selected in key positions but, after the semi-final scare against the same opponents the previous season, Exeter was to take no chances this time.

An early kick-off found Exeter not to be on top form and Barnstaple actually led twice in the first half but it was soon evident that the game was to go by the form-book. Green kicked to the corners where the pack took-over with forwards scoring three of the four tries registered and Exeter lifted the Cup for the eighth time in succession (32-6).

The League season was to conclude with a re-arranged home fixture with London Welsh. In the words of an Express & Echo headline, it was "A game too far for champs". In front of a large shirt-sleeved crowd, Exeter failed to raise its game and was comprehensively beaten. Just after half-time, Exeter pulled back to within two points of the visitors but the fight back lasted only a few minutes and the visitors held sway until the end (14-32). Exeter could celebrate the award of the Division 4 trophy but this was not quite the end to the season that supporters had hoped for. Harry Langley, Exeter's stalwart lock, deserved better in his last First XV game.