

116th Year 1987-8

Continuing recovery was welcomed by all followers the club. The Annual General Meeting could report that 1987-8 “was a season when realistic targets were achieved and a steady improvement in attitudes and playing (*was*) shown by all those concerned”. From this season Merit Table C was replaced by a new league system in which Exeter was placed in Division 3.

Leading the team for this campaign was back row forward Nick Bodnar who had joined the club after playing for Paignton. His vice-captain was utility back Peter Drewett.

Two non-competition home games opened the season. The first, against Public School Wanderers, was lost (3-7) and the other, against Salisbury, was won (10-7). The first Division 3 game in the Courage Championship found the team travelling to the Vale of Lune where a defeat illustrated the task that was to be faced in this competition (3-27).

There followed a somewhat mixed bag of results. Two home victories, over Bridgwater & Albion (24-10) and Devon & Cornwall Police (26-8), showed that the team was scoring some points again but in between these games Exeter was “hammered” at Gloucester (0 – 35). The points dried up in a Division 3 game at Fylde where the team “played a lot of solid attractive rugby without scoring points when we were in the ascendancy” (13-48). There was a similar patten to the home game against Glamorgan Wanderers when the “forwards were more than a match for the Glamorgan eight” (3-27). In contrast to the previous two weeks, a home win against Saracens (a Division 2 club) showed that the club could rise to the occasion and score points when necessary (19-7).

The next two Division 3 games, both at home, ended in defeat “after fine performances” – West Hartlepool (6-18) and Wakefield (19-29). Then followed “an ineffective display” at Tiverton (?-?).

The next important fixture came in the form of a Devon Cup first round tie - a home draw against Crediton. After victory in the similar encounter the previous season, the visitors no doubt harboured hopes of a repeat success. Sadly for them it was not to be and it was probably of scant consolation to know that they scored the only try of the game (9-4).

At Barnstaple Exeter were back in try scoring mood (31-4) and a narrow home win over Walsall followed (16-12). The pre-Christmas meeting with Plymouth Albion, now a Division 3 fixture, was lost (9-18) but on Boxing Day Torquay Athletic was defeated (19-6). Both of these last two games took place at the County Ground. The New Year began with a foot of the table encounter with Maidstone. Travelling with a team whose average age was 24 Exeter suffered another league defeat (9-23).

Despite promising signs Exeter now had reached “the lowest point in the season” according to the Annual Report. After defeat at Maidstone, Exeter stood at the bottom of Courage National Division 3, without a win. To make matters worse Okehampton came to the County Ground for a third round tie in the Bass Devon Cup and won (3-12). Then came an enforced lay-off of five blank weeks due to adverse weather.

As the Annual General Meeting was able to report “After the break the corner was turned and our young and inexperienced side showed their character and determination”.

Resuming League activities in February with a home game against Metropolitan Police, Exeter achieved a first win, albeit by one point, in the competition (4-3). This was soon followed by a draw away at Morley, the club below them in the table. The home team only drew level at the very end of the game (10-10). A routine win at home over Sidmouth (27-9) preceded a not unexpected defeat by an in-form Bath team (3-32). Defeat at Cheltenham would have been less expected (11-17).

Improved league performances continued with a narrow win at Nuneaton in another bottom of the table clash (11-9). After a home win over Launceston in a friendly (?-?), attention was then drawn to another foot of the table meeting with Birmingham. As the club programme stated “The place to be is at the County Ground where we play, what is for us, our most important game of the season, probably one of the most important games in the history of our club. A win today means III Division rugby for Exeter next season, anything less must not be contemplated.” The response from the team was emphatic – the highest points score in the league campaign (32-0).

After that effort, defeats away to Torquay Athletic (10-24) and at home to Bedford (9-15) over Easter came as an anti-climax, as did a draw with Camborne in the Duchy. It was a game Exeter “should have and could have won”. The Cornishmen levelled the score with the last kick of the game (23-23). Mid-week under the County Ground lights, Exeter lost to Bristol (3-22) before defeating Tredegar (21-16) at the home venue.

The final game of the Division 3 season was disappointing when visiting Sheffield came out ahead after a tight game (12-14).

The playing season was brought to an end with a tour to France repeating a similar venture at the end of the 1977-8 season. Games were arranged for both the First and “A” XV's, each team playing two matches. All four were won.

Overall the “A” team had played 32 matches half of which were won and half lost. The “B” XV record read played 30 games of which 20 were won and one drawn, the remainder being lost.

This season saw the establishment of the regular half-back partnership of Andy Green and Andy Maunder which was to serve the club well in future seasons. Scrum-half Maunder played in every first team game.

After one season in office Nick Bodnar decided to relinquish the post of captain due to work and family commitments. In addition Peter Drewett, the vice-captain, decided to retire after staying loyal to the club during six lean seasons.