

## 115<sup>th</sup> Year 1986-7

Graham Bess was elected captain for a second term, to lead a team still in the process of rebuilding. The pattern of results for the season was similar to those of the previous two or three years, but there were some signs of improvement in overall playing ability.

Unfortunately for loyal supporters the improvements did not come soon enough. The first two Merit Table C matches were both lost after the club had given poor performances at home against Vale of Lune in heavy rain (0-28) and Nuneaton (12-14). However when Exeter played its first John Player Cup fixture for four years, on the last Saturday in September a much better performance was seen. In an away game against Oxford, Exeter gained what the Times described as a “comfortable” victory (28-9).

A week later the club’s task of surviving in Merit Table C was put into context when Fylde won with ease at the County Ground (12-48). A recovery of sorts was achieved with a home win over Launceston in a non-competition meeting (16-7) but the team fell away again with a defeat at Saracens (10-28). The month ended with a further set-back. Exeter had been drawn to play Old Reigatians away in the second round of the John Player Cup. The Old Boys coach had prepared well having taken a video of the Saracens v Exeter game. Basing their game on strong scrummaging the Old Boys ran out winners, scoring the only try of the game (3-12).

It would have been of scant consolation to Exeter that Old Reigatians went on to defeat Saracens in the next round before gamely losing to Gloucester in the Fourth Round.

Exeter’s struggle continued with home defeats. Torquay Athletic had, according to Guy Shackle, “very little to savour from this victory in the most boring of local derbies” (9-12). Mid-week Devonport Services took a rare scalp at the County Ground (?-?). Three days later at Tiverton, Exeter did manage a victory “rather convincingly, mainly due to the team, getting it together in the second half” (?-?).

Perhaps reflecting the club’s current poor standing, Exeter asked Bath for a postponement of their arranged fixture as it coincided with a Devon county championship game. Instead the club played host to Lydney and lost (6-23). Then came what must have been regarded as the low point in the season when the club went to Crediton for a first round tie in the Devon Cup Competition. Not only did Exeter not do themselves justice, the game was described by a local headline as “Rugby’s Ugly Face”. It was certainly a physical encounter and an Exeter forward was sent off the field and two others needed attention for head injuries. Post match comment somewhat distracted attention from the achievement of the home side (4-16).

The Crediton victory was no flash in the pan. After a defeat at Glamorgan Wanderers (7-16), Exeter welcomed Crediton to the County Ground a fortnight after the cup tie. Under floodlights, each side scored a penalty and try, but a conversion was enough to secure the result for the visitors (7-9).

December saw two further dispiriting defeats away from home, the first of which was inflicted by Metropolitan Police (6-47). Then at the Recreation round, Exeter, in the words of Guy Shackle, “looked very dispirited and poorly organised for a club with great traditions” when losing to Torquay Athletic (6-23). A home victory over Barnstaple was achieved before the year ended (12-3). The second half of the season began with a comfortable home victory over Cheltenham (32-14), Exeter’s first and only South-West Merit Table success of the season. The following week at Camborne, in another regional Merit Table encounter, Exeter scored eleven points in as many minutes at the start of the game but scored a final try just before the whistle (15-20).

A victory at Teignmouth (13-6) preceded a home game with Blackheath who fielded a team containing five players under 21 years of age making their first team debuts. The plan paid off for the

visitors from Kent who scored seven tries (15-32). Defeat by visiting Newbridge (3-17) preceded a rare away win when facing Bridgwater & Albion (15-9). Back at home a week later, Exeter fell to another substantial Merit Table C defeat, this time to Morley (4-28).

March began brightly, allowing John Baxter to pen in a club programme “Exeter’s last two games both away brought us fine results a 4-4 draw with Tredegar and a 26-9 thrashing of Birmingham in a Division III game”. Merit Table C was already being restyled and would be officially recognised as such the following season.

The final six weeks of the season contained some tough fixtures. Home defeats were recorded against Camborne, when Bess failed with a potentially match winning penalty (9-11) and Plymouth Albion (3-16), whilst the team frustratingly lost by a single point at Taunton (6-7). Defeat at the Memorial Ground against Bristol would have been expected (3-51) and after a long trip to Sheffield the team played well in a relatively narrow loss (4-14).

A victory at the County Ground over Exmouth saw Exeter scoring three tries in a winning performance (16-3) but a dozen points was not enough to overcome a dominant Gloucester team (12-44). The season extended into May, when Exeter again had to travel to Yorkshire for a Merit Table C game. The opponents, Roundhay, had to acknowledge a single point but significant victory by the visitors (10-9).

The Devon Cup performance was a disaster. Participation in the South-West Merit Table was only marginally better. This season only one game was won out of seven played but Exeter moved off the bottom to leave Cheltenham, the team that Exeter defeated, winless at the foot of the table.

In the final Merit Table C listing Exeter finished in tenth place out of twelve beating both Birmingham and Roundhay the two teams below them. The result of the final game of the season meant that Exeter would qualify for the next season’s competition on merit.

The rewards might have been scant but there were signs that Exeter was beginning to drag itself out of a depression that had been endured for four seasons.