

111th Year 1982-3

The playing fortunes of the club took a decided dip, resulting in the poorest playing record since 1957-8. Only thirteen matches were won out of a total 44 games played and the rest ended in defeat. As many as 817 points were conceded against 484 recorded for the club. The Annual Report in its usual muted fashion announced that "It would be unrealistic to say that the rugby provided this season had been generally other than disappointing."

After one year as captain Simon Day stood down, his place being taken by former Torquay Athletic player Steve Donovan now in his third year as an Exeter squad member. Behind the scenes, coach Bob Staddon was joined by Les May who had charge of Physical Education at Exeter School.

The season started with a mid-week home win over Taunton (22-0). Another home win followed but the team put in a dismal performance against neighbours Sidmouth (16-14). A tougher assignment followed with a visit to Pontypridd whose programme notes were quite complimentary regarding Exeter's hospitality. The on-field performance showed promise in defeat (6-16). On a week-end tour, Orrell paid a first visit to the County Ground. Exeter's erratic form disappointed the home crowd in a heavy defeat (6-29).

Then, on the following Saturday, came the result that shaped the season. In the John Players Cup competition Exeter had been drawn to play High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. Exeter had the resources to defeat what was ostensibly a junior club but the opposition rose to the occasion and the home forwards gained dominance over the visiting pack. Wycombe won the half-back duel as well. Four tries to one summed up the dominance of the home team. In the words of the Annual Report "we never really recovered from this shock defeat" (6-26).

The dismal mood deepened when, three days later, on a wet Tuesday evening, the team went to Barnstaple and lost (3-7). Exeter fielded a team that showed twelve changes from the one that had faced High Wycombe. A recovery of sorts was made at home against Nottingham when Exeter led by a point at half-time. Just after the interval the visitors registered a converted try to take the lead. A penalty goal by Graham Bess narrowed the margin. A break in the closing seconds nearly won the game but the team had to be satisfied merely with an improved performance (7-9).

After five consecutive defeats, Exeter did achieve its third victory of the season when playing Crediton at the County Ground. The margin was clear and victory came despite County players being absent and the fact that Exeter had two players sent off during the game (28-0). A trip to London to play Saracens without two injured County standard props, Chris Mills and Trevor Harris, found Exeter facing a stiff task. Although defeated the team gave a reasonable account of themselves (13-21). Newton Abbot under the County Ground floodlights was a less daunting prospect even on a County day but Exeter made hard work of gaining a much needed victory. "It was a game best forgotten" wrote Terry Davies. Exeter led by a single point for much of the game and the team was only four points ahead in the closing stages. A Newton Abbot break out was only just stifled by a lone defender who prevented another embarrassment. Finally enough possession came Exeter's way to gain a clear victory (22-9).

Still lacking cohesion, the team did manage a fairly comprehensive Tuesday night win at home over Devonport Services (31-4). Remaining at home Exeter might have had hopes of a third consecutive victory against Glamorgan Wanderers who had been beaten in the last two encounters between the clubs. It was not to be as the Welsh side edged ahead in an ill-tempered meeting during which a visiting forward was sent off (8-13). Three more defeats quickly followed. The side sent to face Wasps was the strongest available but the London club was overwhelmingly superior (0-51). A more bitter pill to swallow came at Tiverton. Even without six players on county duty Exeter should have held the home side to a closer call (3-12). At home to Camborne, the game was more or less lost in the opening minutes when Exeter conceded three penalties. In the view of Terry Davies in his

programme notes, Exeter was the better side gaining far more possession. He thought Camborne to be bereft of ideas and summed up with by saying "At least Exeter tried". Even Camborne thought the game "could hardly be described as a classic" (3-12).

Some respite came by courtesy of the Fixture Secretary "who arranged games with 'less senior' opposition". Even so the home performances against Exmouth (12-6) and the Royal Navy (10-6) were less than convincing. The uphill climb found the summit as far away as ever and Exeter did not win again until February.

At the beginning of December a much improved Stroud team, came to the County Ground (to replace a first meeting with Gosforth) and it was the visiting team that went away with the spoils (6-12). An away journey to meet Headingley ended in a comfortable victory for the home side (6-28). The home game with Plymouth Albion was spoilt by atrocious playing conditions which were reflected in the scoring, the visitors winning by two penalty goals to one (3-6).

A home game against Metropolitan Police had to be cancelled due to the state of the pitch. It had recovered sufficiently to allow a match with Torquay Athletic to go ahead on the last Saturday of the year. Playing more as a team than the opposition, the visitors avenged the Devon Cup Final defeat of the previous season (3-12). On New Year's Day a much improved Lydney side came to the County Ground for the first meeting between the two clubs since the 1905-6 season. Boosted by former Bristol and Gloucester players the visitors played some attractive rugby. Exeter had to contend with a number of missed penalty attempts and a forward being sent off after retaliating on behalf of a colleague (10-22).

Another defeat followed at Roehampton against Rosslyn Park. Even though the margin between the teams was wide, consolation was taken from the fact that Exeter performed with spirit and an excellent display was capped by two fine tries. The Park took a very early lead and it appeared that the home side could well achieve a score of fifty points but the Exeter pack "played out of their skins" and kept the score down (10-31). Under the home floodlights a Friday night game against Bristol followed a similar pattern. On a heavy pitch the visitors did score five tries but it was not the runaway win that some had predicted (3-25).

It was an altogether different story when Exeter met Bath at the Recreation Ground. It was said that the Bath players almost queued up to score in achieving what was, at that time, Bath's highest ever total points in a game. A demoralised Exeter team could show only a single penalty for its efforts (3-74). After such a pounding defeat at Camborne was almost inevitable. "Certainly not a good advertisement for West country rugby" said the West Briton (0-16). Exeter had now lost nine consecutive matches.

The County Ground was unfit for a mid-week meeting with Exeter University but had recovered sufficiently for a game against Cheltenham to go ahead, but the surface quickly became a quagmire. The following home programme notes thought "Exeter had every right to be elated (pleased as well) after beating Cheltenham". Strengthened by the return of Simon Day and Steve Lewis, the Exeter back row made the most of the conditions. The third member of the unit, Graham Willis, scored a try (15-7). Sadly the sequence of defeats returned. Visitors Newbridge were twenty points to the good when Exeter, having regained some confidence, rattled the Welsh team's composure in the second half to score nine points before falling to a final try by the visitors (9-24). Two strong opponents came next on the fixture list and Exeter conceded more than twenty points in both games – at home to Blackheath (7-26) and away at Aberavon (0-28).

The first three games in March saw Exeter sink to another low point of the season. The first game, a rearranged meeting with Exeter University, provided little for home supporters to cheer about. Exeter did have a couple more injuries to cope with. Penalty goals dominated to scoring. The students landed five against three and scored the only try into the bargain (9-19). Three days later Devon & Cornwall

Police came to the County Ground for a third round Devon Cup tie. The Police team had grown in strength in recent seasons but was still regarded as a “junior” side. Exeter’s hopes of regaining a place in the John Player Cup lay in winning the Devon Cup but the club progressed no further. Defeat “was a bitter pill to swallow” (6-7). Further ignominy followed. Still unsettled and weakened by injuries, Exeter nevertheless travelled to Beacon Park with a team containing several experienced players. Hopes of a win might not have been high but the margin of defeat was well beyond expectations. A “torrent of tries” in the second half earned Plymouth Albion its highest score against Exeter (6-53).

After suffering six confidence sapping defeats, Exeter then managed to defeat Clifton at the County Ground (17-9). An away match against Maesteg had to be called off because of adverse weather conditions. Affording the players some respite in what had been a difficult season, a week-end tour to Guernsey was undertaken at the end of March. A “not too representative” side returned “triumphant” against opposition that was “not too demanding”. Guernsey second team was easily beaten (44-0) and Guernsey 1st XV was “not so easily” beaten (20-10). Both of these results were included in the club’s playing record for the season.

Reality soon returned at home when Bedford showed their superiority with a comfortable victory (6-22). A series of five away matches began with defeats by Liverpool (13-18) and Glamorgan Wanderers (18-29). In both of these games the side gave very encouraging performances. Defeat at Bristol was heavy but “the spirit was there” (10-46). The team then slumped again. “Losing to Taunton should never have happened” said Terry Davies in a club programme (9-15). It was hardly a consolation that in the last game of this sequence of away games, at Sidmouth, Exeter gained its only away victory of the season (17-9).

With two games to go, players may have been looking forward to the end of the difficult season, but these matches were against doughty opponents - Gloucester and Northampton although both games were to be played on the County Ground.

Totally against the form book and easily the highlight of the playing season, Exeter “took play to Gloucester in no uncertain fashion” and was ten points to the good at half time. With ten minutes left on the clock the visiting were in the lead by a point when Malcolm Collins, a recent recruit from the University, landed a penalty goal that secured the victory. “It was one of the most inept displays by a Gloucester team for a very long time, but should not detract at all from Exeter’s victory” was Davies’ verdict. Singled out particular mention was the front row of Trevor Harris, Bruce Priday and Geoff Retter (13-11). Just to put things into perspective Exeter “A” was annihilated by Gloucester United to the tune of 8-138!

The final visiting team for the season was Northampton who, by its own high standards, had not had a particularly good campaign winning only six games until a revival of form in the previous three weeks when they won five more. The last of these was against Exeter who could not repeat the previous week’s performance (15-28).

The “A” XV results reflected those of the senior tea,. Winning eleven games, drawing three and losing 22. The “B” XV showed a credit balance winning 18 and losing 14 of 32 games played. Although showing an improvement in the latter half of the season, the Colts returned a disappointing record winning six and drawing one of 31 games played.

The Annual Report regretted the fact that the club had not secured a place in the following John Player Cup competition and highlighted the heavy burden the subsequent loss of revenue would place on club finances.

In a press interview in February coach Bob Staddon pointed out that “It took our fixture secretary Tracy Turner ten years, with the help of a strong first XV, to build up the quality of fixture list we

how have. Unfortunately we haven't quite got a good enough side for our strong opponents". Despite having to stand down as one of the two coaches, Staddon remained confident for the future and he became an instrumentable figure in the club's eventual recovery even if it did take, as he predicted, "a couple more seasons yet".