

## 113<sup>th</sup> Year 1984-5

A caption to a 1<sup>st</sup> team photo taken at the end of the season encapsulated the club's fortunes during 1984-5 – "Still smiling ... at the end of a troubled season". Exeter had experienced difficult patches during its long history but this season probably represented the lowest point yet encountered. Looking back on the season Jack Challenger was to comment "I do not wish to dwell on last season's results, although of course, our thanks must be given to the captains and coaches who never gave up trying to improve the club's playing record".

Prop-forward Trevor Harris took on the difficult mantle of captain. His leadership qualities were certainly put to the test. A product of the club's youth policy, he had made his first team debut in February 1976 at the early age for a prop-forward of seventeen years. A loyal club man he continued to play for the senior team, apart from a brief spell of a few months at Bath, for twenty-one seasons. He was only twenty years of age when he played his first game for Devon. A competitive player, Harris was sent off the field on five occasions during his long career and in January 1988 was suspended from playing for eighteen months by the Devon R.F.U..

Paul Lander, a scrum-half who had joined the club from Coventry six weeks before the end of the previous season, was appointed vice-captain.

Many changes in the playing strength had taken place during the summer, many players leaving the area due to changes in employment and others returning to play for their local clubs. It was noted that Exeter did not have many sizeable forwards.

By the end of September the task facing the Exeter squad was only too evident. For all his enthusiasm and drive, the new captain's season was disrupted by a serious injury on the opening day of the season in a home meeting with Liverpool. He completed just over half the game before he damaged knee-ligaments and had to be helped off the field. Lacking possession Exeter then conceded a succession of tries, although the team stuck to its task to the end (9-37). Worse was to follow when Okehampton, at home, won a mid-week encounter and on the following Saturday Taunton, also at home, inflicted a defeat on Exeter. The latter game was not a happy one for either the club or the new captain. Fit enough to act as touch-judge, Harris was dismissed from the field of play whilst going to the aid of an embattled colleague. In pouring rain Exeter took the lead through a Paul Westgate try. He was later also sent off along with a Taunton prop in what was described as "a violent second half". The home team twice overtook an Exeter lead to win (9-10).

The future looked even bleaker when the club travelled to meet Orrell who went on to score thirteen tries for a comprehensive victory (12-68). Back at the County Ground the result of a Merit Table match with Camborne brought a mixture of relief and disappointment. Exeter escaped defeat for the first time in the season, but could only manage to draw with their Cornish rivals with a Paul Banks penalty goal (3-3).

A dismal first month of the season became grimmer with yet another comprehensive defeat, this time at Maesteg (4-59).

October began in much the same vein with a home defeat at the hands of visitors Nottingham (10-36). Struggling Exeter managed three victories over local clubs, including an ill-tempered encounter at home against Crediton (19-10) but was not until the last Saturday of the month that the first victory over a senior club in the season was recorded – at the County Ground against Devonport Services (13-9). In between these games Exeter, at home, was unable to avoid a second defeat by Okehampton.

November began with a trip to London to play Richmond and a record defeat for the season was the outcome (0-76). More ignominy followed when both Sidmouth and Tiverton celebrated victories over their bigger neighbour. Exeter's standing amongst Devon clubs was now being severely questioned. A

victory at home over Redruth gave promise of better things to come (15-10) but the team then slumped to defeat against the Royal Navy at home (3-7) and Plymouth Albion at Beacon Park (15-36).

December saw another drubbing when Bath ran in fourteen tries at the Recreation Ground (3-64) then Redruth avenged their earlier defeat by winning the return game in Cornwall (12-16). A narrow but most welcome third senior victory for the season came against Clifton at the County Ground (13-10) but three consecutive defeats followed leading up to Christmas – Metropolitan Police (9-46), Saracens (0-38) and Torquay Athletic (12-16). In the latter game, according to local reporter Guy Shackle Exeter showed “improved form in a dismal season”.

When Exeter faced Exmouth at the County Ground on the final Saturday of the year the team had won only three matches against senior opposition and the visitors would have had high hopes of emulating other local junior clubs in defeating their hosts. The game was surprisingly lively and enterprising on a mud-bound pitch. The home side went into a nine point lead through a try by Rob Pugsley and a penalty and a conversion from Simon Banks. The visitors then showed their ability with some slick back moves which Exeter managed to stifle with improved defensive play. Exeter’s first serious attack in the second period led to a try by Graham Bess. This was the first time in fourteen games that Exeter had scored two tries in a game (13-6).

Only the most loyal of club supporters would have taken much heart from performances during the second half of the season. These were a handful of victories and defeats tended to be less severe, suggesting improvement in defence. But one cannot ignore the fact that the club did not win a single game after the end of February and ended the season with ten straight defeats. Inability to score tries meant that the club’s sole means of scoring during this period was from the boot of full-back Banks.

“Four weeks of disrupted training sessions and no matches proved to be just the breathing space that beleaguered Exeter need” observed one commentator. On the last Saturday in January, Exeter, at home, amply avenged recent defeats at the hands of Devon & Cornwall Police. Three tries were scored and full-back Simon Banks landed all his attempts at goal (24-10). Defeat at the County Ground by Cheltenham in the following game came as a set-back (13-18) but a couple of weeks later, in a hastily re-arranged fixture Exeter achieved only their second victory away from home with an impressive win at Rugby (22-8). In preparation for a Devon Cup Quarter Final meeting with Plymouth Albion, Exeter looked to arrange a mid-week match. The club was grateful to Teignmouth for agreeing to fill the gap. The visitors actually took the lead after three minutes, but Exeter then registered five tries to Teignmouth’s one before the game ended in fog (30-7).

Heartened by having won five out of the last six matches, Exeter having won at Paignton in a previous round (9-0), then travelled to Beacon Park for the Devon Cup game. Although regarded as under-dogs, Exeter were hopeful of upsetting the holders, but the home side prevailed in a closely contested game (3-17).

Thereafter the remainder of the season did not bring a happy reading to the season. A home meeting with Maesteg did have a much closer outcome than the earlier encounter in Wales (6-14) but defeat at Camborne was disappointing (6-26). Exeter’s poor standing within the County was reinforced by defeats at home by Plymouth Albion (3-29) and Torquay Athletic – a fourth straight victory over Exeter for the Tics (6-23). Two days later at Bridgwater & Albion the team suffered another inglorious defeat (0-34).

Three of the last four games were played at the County Ground but all were lost by wide margins – Northampton (3-23), Launceston (3-22) and Gloucester (9-59). In between these a game at Bristol saw Exeter fall to the second heaviest defeat of the seasons (0-70).

Having experienced periods of injury, suspension and illness as well as trials and tribulations on the field of play, Trevor Harris, the ever enthusiastic captain, might have been excused if he welcomed the end of the season with a sense of relief.