

96th Year 1967-8

Under the continuing captaincy of Keith Hopper, Exeter enjoyed another excellent season. Of the 41 games played (two less than the previous season) no fewer than 26 were won and one drawn. A similar pattern to that of the previous campaign emerged – only four defeats were suffered up to the end of January but thereafter the team was defeated ten more times. Even so the club enjoyed a most successful month of April.

Over the previous five years or so the Rugby Football Union and International Rugby Board had made a number of changes to the laws of the game to make the game more attractive to both players and spectators. These changes were beginning to bear fruit. Still playing positive rugby, Exeter amassed a record 678 points in a season. Helping to shape Exeter's open style was Martin Underwood who returned to assist with coaching and played in sixteen games.

Dick Manley played in 30 games before finally retiring.

The playing season for Exeter started at The Reddings where Moseley went into a thirteen point lead by half time. The home side struck again shortly after the interval. Exeter, showing more determination than skill, spent much of the game penned in their own half and had only a Staddon penalty to show for their efforts at the end of the game (3-13). Two days later a Monday meeting at the County Ground with Harlequins did not suggest an easy encounter but Exeter soon took the lead. A foray led by Manley and John Baxter led to a try by Graham Angell. Harlequins struck back with two rather fortunate tries before Angell went over for his second scoring effort. According to Alan Gibson writing in *The Times*, Harlequins were "hard, pressed" in "a vigorous, cheerful game". The cheer was more with the visitors who scored a late try to win (8-13).

A scheduled game with Esher had to be cancelled when the Rugby Football Union arranged to stage an England trial at the County Ground, so it took another seven days for Exeter to register its first win of the season, at the Recreation Ground against Torquay Athletic (24-6). Away again, this time at the Mennaye Field for an evening kick-off, Penzance & Newlyn and Exeter, in ideal conditions, were evenly matched for the first half-hour. Thereafter the game belonged to team from Devon. Six tries were scored without reply in an emphatic victory (34-0). A much tighter game ensued against Newton Abbot at the County Ground. "Newton to their credit were outclassed to start with but they never stopped trying" and the result could have been different if the visitors had been more fortunate with two long-range penalties. As it was Exeter won with a Graham Angell try, described as "a real cracker", and two Staddon penalty goals. Barrie Carless had to leave the field injured just before time (9-3).

Prospects should have been more doubtful in a home game against Glamorgan Wanderers and this seemed to be the case after a dreary first half. Then Exeter surged ahead and scored five tries (24-14). At the beginning of October Exeter went to The Rectory and avenged the double defeat by Devonport Services the previous season (19-9). Conditions were not welcoming for Redruth on a sodden County Ground with an almost gale force wind driving rain across the field. To make prospects even more difficult, the visitors had to make six team changes before kick-off. Exeter handled the ball when possible scoring two tries by Angell and one by Staddon. The full back also managed to land two penalties and two conversions despite the gusting wind (19-3). Bearing in mind the way Exeter had been playing at this point in the season, the result of the next two home games must have come as a surprise and a disappointment. The opponents both won by a similar score - Saracens (0-3) and Clifton (0-3).

Quickly making amends for the previous lapses, Exeter remained unbeaten until the first Saturday in February. At a rain-soaked Priory Park it was apparent that the weather conditions, together with the counter attraction of a televised England v New Zealand match, would keep all but the most dedicated spectators at home, and so it turned out. A rather unusual gesture was made by the Exeter officials and

players alike by suggesting the game should be postponed rather than play a game in such poor conditions. A replacement evening fixture could easily have been arranged. The Taunton officials obviously thought otherwise and the game went ahead. Exeter made most of the running and by adapting better to the conditions were twenty-one points ahead at half-time. Taunton improved in the second half but to no avail (27-3). Another clash occurred the following week when Exeter had an open date on the fixture list. Torquay Athletic agreed to play at the County Ground despite Devon facing Cornwall at Plymouth on the same afternoon. Although fielding a handful of reserves Exeter managed to scrape a win (6-3).

Two more routine victories against local opposition came next – at Exmouth (29-12) and at home to Paignton (32-5). At the start of December Torquay Athletic again provided the opposition on the County Ground. Exeter appeared to be running away with the game as the team was leading by thirteen points at half-time. The ‘Tics came back and actually “won” the second half but it was not quite enough as Exeter managed to add another five points and thus achieved a hat-trick of wins over the South Devon rivals for the season (31-12).

Following a week off due to poor weather, Exeter took to the road to meet London Hospital. After scoring five points in the first minute of the game, Exeter appeared to underestimate the opposition and started attacking audaciously from their own half or even from behind their own goal line. The Hospital hit back to score and Exeter settled down to play a more constructive game. The visitors led at the interval by eight points. Skipper, Hopper who had pulled his team together, went over for a try, the only score of the second half (14-3).

Two routine victories followed – at Teignmouth (29-9) and at home to Exmouth (22-0). Unbeaten by any Devon club in the season so far, Exeter then faced Plymouth Albion at the County Ground. Dubbed as the unofficial “Devon Championship”, the game revolved around the power of the Plymouth pack and the strength of the Exeter backs. After sizing each other up it was Exeter who began to assert themselves and eventually managed to touch-down five tries without reply (22-0).

Exeter’s unbeaten run nearly came to an end with a hard fought home draw with Taunton (3-3) before an away win at Bridgwater & Albion restored confidence (19-3). This confidence was carried on the following week with a first visit to Pandy Park to meet Cross Keys. With both teams prepared to throw the ball about play moved from end to end. After half an hour centre John Radford made a searing break that led to a try by David Hughes. In the second half, the centre made another break from his own half and this time winger Graham Angell touched down. Hughes added another try late on whilst the home team was unable to register any points (13-0).

Just when it appeared that Exeter was on top of its game, the winning run of twelve matches came to an unexpected end against visitors Belfast Royal Academy Former Pupils. Despite missing four players who had been selected for Devon, Exeter was expected to win against the tourists. One of the replacements in the Exeter team was former international Martin Underwood. All started well for the home team when Bob Staddon landed two penalty goals within ten minutes of the start. Another penalty was added before the visitors pulled back to within a point by half time. Belfast scored next but Exeter restored the lead with a fourth penalty before conceding another converted try. Exeter tried to open up more but the effort came too late (12-16).

Visitors for the following week, Weston super Mare, provided more stiff opposition and once again the Somerset team was able to narrowly beat Exeter (11-14). An away meeting with Barnstaple would prove tricky but the home team could not match the weight and cohesion of the Exeter pack. All the scoring took place in the first half at the end of which Exeter lost centre Mike Maynard with a dislocated shoulder, after which “Exeter lost a lot of their zip” (10-3). The return to winning form was brief as the team then lost two games heavily, at home to Guy’s Hospital (6-22) and then away to Plymouth Albion (6-21).

Another defeat followed when, with three first choice players missing, Exeter went down narrowly to St. Luke's College after both teams had served up, what was later described as "champagne rugby" (8-9). An easy win over Devonport Services at the Country Ground (31-8) came before the team slipped to another defeat, this time away at Bridgend (6-14).

Two weeks after the first meeting Exeter again faced St. Luke's College. Far from displaying champagne rugby the fare for this encounter was described as "ullage". "What a let-down! Never has a rugby crowd waited so long for so little" was the view of one correspondent. The student's completed the double by scoring a single try and two penalty goals to a Bob Staddon penalty but the margin was more than the team deserved. Both sets of backs cancelled each other out and there was little open play. It was tense game and both John Baxter and a St. Luke's forward had to be warned by the referee (3-9).

Two further home defeats, by Cheltenham (6-8) and a revenge by Barnstaple (3-11), meant that after the winning sequence of twelve games. Exeter, had lost nine out of the eleven matches since the beginning of February. The tide then turned again and only one game was lost of the remaining eight fixtures that completed the season.

On the last Saturday of March Old Blues proved to be an easy victim at the County Ground (32-0). Esher should have been a different proposition on their home ground but four Staddon penalty goals in the first half gave Exeter the confidence to play an open game again and score five tries (29-6).

A mid-week evening home game with Bristol proved to be the highlight of the season. Not since September 1946 had Exeter beaten Bristol. After that success the two teams had met on twenty-one occasions during which time Exeter had managed to hold out for a draw twice, the other nineteen games sometimes ending in a heavy defeat. This game proved to be a nail biter. Just after the interval Exeter took a one point lead with a second penalty goal to counter a converted try by the visitors. Bristol's open play was rewarded with another converted try but Exeter, with ten minutes left to play responded with a try engineered by back row David Hughes and wing Martin Underwood. Hughes both started and finished the move. An excellent relieving kick from his own 25 yard line that was cleverly gathered and taken on by the winger who passed back inside for the supporting Hughes to score. A Staddon conversion put Exeter back in the lead and a penalty goal by the full back saw the team go further ahead. Bristol fought back and scored a try wide out. Fortunately for Exeter the difficult conversion attempt sailed wide (14-13).

Four days later Exeter overwhelmed tourists Old Cranleighans (43-9) before Exeter in turn slipped to the heaviest defeat of the season against Moseley on Easter Monday. Already fielding an understrength team, Exeter was further handicapped by losing debutant wing forward Alan Baur with a cut head after thirty minutes when the scores were level. The visitors piled on the pressure, scoring seven tries in all (11-37). Exeter soon recovered with a home victory over a lack-lustre Bath side playing its sixth game in eight days (19-11).

The last Saturday of the season saw Exeter in Cornwall facing Redruth. The local team did well to hold the visitors to a slender three point half time lead but thereafter the Exeter backs took control with some "hard running". Captain Hopper was instrumental in many scoring moves that led to seven tries being scored, five of them from behind the scrum (32-9).

Back at home the following Monday, Exeter defeated Gloucester for the second successive season with full back Bob Staddon contributing thirteen points (19-11).