

105th Year 1976-7

After an interval of two seasons, Paul Baxter was elected to serve as captain for a second time. Four fewer games were played compared with the previous campaign and four fewer games were lost. The final record read played 41, won 27, 2 drawn and 12 lost. For the first time a squad system was introduced for the senior team. This was to be Barrie Carless' final season as club coach having served a five year stint in the rôle.

Another new feature this season was the commencement of Regional Merit Tables, an initiative of the Rugby Football Union in its ongoing attempts to regulate competitive rugby in England. The South West Merit Table consisted of six teams, namely Bath, Bristol, Exeter, Gloucester, Falmouth and Plymouth Albion. Each team was to play up to two games (excluding Cup matches) against the other sides in the table. At the end of the season the final positions would have a bearing on the selection of teams for the next season's John Player Cup competition. Exeter already had fixtures with the other teams in the group except Falmouth but an open date at the end of January enabled a meeting to be arranged.

September kicked-off with three comfortable victories. Penryn arrived late at the County Ground because of a coach break-down. "It was good to see the wing three-quarters in action and there is no doubt that there is a lot to be said for basic orthodox rugby" according to a club programme (35-13). On their own ground, Teignmouth fielded a weakened team but managed to avoid a drubbing like that which had occurred the previous season. Bob Staddon contributed twenty points to his club's total (36-6). At the County Ground on the second Saturday of the month, Esher was beaten by a similar margin (32-8).

The first defeat of the season came as a surprise. Playing at home on a Wednesday evening, Paignton defeated Exeter for the first time since September 1957. After an early Exeter penalty, Paignton broke away twice to register ten points after twenty minutes' play. The home team went further ahead with a penalty. Exeter tried everything but the second half remained pointless. Said coach Carless "Only one player played well and the other 14 played badly. But take nothing away from Paignton. They played extremely well." The one player said to have played well was full-back Staddon but even he missed five penalty kicks at goal (3-13). Two more painful losses followed. Torquay Athletic had a point to prove on a visit to the County Ground because the club had not been included in the Merit Table. On the day Exeter made too many mistakes and again Staddon's kicking let him down; he missed six kicks at goal. The visitors scored the only try of the game (3-9). The game at Bath was ruined by a near tropical downpour and was littered with elementary handling errors. Although Exeter gave a spirited performance, Bath emerged on top in a muddy scramble (3-14).

Appearing to turn a corner, Exeter won two games at the start of October. At Streatham-Croydon the home side went down more easily than expected (32-16) and a visit from Redruth ended fairly conclusively in Exeter's favour despite the absence from the home team of six players through injury or county calls (20-6). However another trip to London ended in disappointment when Saracens, celebrating its centenary, won with a clear victory. Said a later club programme "we did not put up a very inspiring exhibition and, in fact, one can almost say we lost the game in the first ten minutes" (6-27).

A mid-week game at Beacon Park would have restored spirits when Plymouth Albion was defeated (12-7).

Two more away games and two defeats dented Exeter's hopes of a revival. At Birmingham, the home team, playing with the aid of a strong wind, was twelve points ahead by the half-way mark. In the second period Birmingham scored two more tries whereas "workmanlike" Exeter could manage only a single penalty (3-26). At Cross Keys the team did a little better but still came up short (12-19).

A fourth away match in a row saw Exeter visiting Priory Park to face an unbeaten Taunton team. The Exeter backs proved to be too lively for their hosts (17-3). What would have been a fifth consecutive away game, a mid-week meeting with Clifton under floodlights, was cancelled.

The next three home games were won with something to spare. Avon & Somerset Constabulary had greatly improved its playing strength over the previous couple of seasons, but even with several key men on duty for Devon, Exeter won a clear victory (32-6). For once St. Luke's College failed to trouble Exeter (35-6). Cheltenham was undergoing a difficult period in their history and proved to be no match for the home side (52-6). During the course of these three games 19 year old scrum half Jonathan Mears amassed 49 points through accurate goal kicking.

December 4th 1976 could be regarded as a significant date in the development of Exeter (Rugby) Football Club. For the first time the club was due to meet a top class club from outside the south-west in the John Player Cup competition. True, they had played against Bath at this stage in the competition the previous season, but in meeting Rosslyn Park the club now drew greater national attention. Match organisation was stepped up. Five hundred posters were displayed, five thousand tickets were printed and a special souvenir programme was produced. All this preparation represented another step on the path to better organised and more competitive rugby for the club. It was a small step maybe. Professional rugby for Exeter was still over twenty years away and there would be several peaks and troughs on the way, but one could argue that the club had now started to recognise its potential.

Rosslyn Park, reinforced by England No.8 Andy Ripley, who had arrived in Exeter from the continent at 2 a.m. on the morning of the match, eventually dominated the game up front enough to allow the backs some freedom. Exeter, who put up at stubborn resistance for the first fifty minutes of the game, took the lead through a Mears penalty. By half time Park had drawn ahead but early in the second period another Mears penalty brought the teams level. The Exeter back-row of Cole, Webber and Miller "were magnificent" according to Ross Salmon of the Western Morning News and were able "to break down Park's passing moves" and "frequently launched a thrilling counter-attack". Eventually the visitors wore down the Exeter defence and scored three tries in the last quarter. The result, according to Alan Gibson of The Times "was closer than it sounds" (6-25). The crowd of 3,000 would have seen in Rosslyn Park's ranks two players, Phil Treseder and Charles Kent, who were later to play in Exeter's colours and included amongst the visitors' replacements was John Scott.

Making two changes to the team that met Rosslyn Park, Exeter then faced a tricky assignment – a Devon Cup match at Brixham who had lost only one game in the season to date. Exeter had to turn to the boot of Mears who landed five penalty goals. Paul Baxter commented "It is the most convincing win we have had at Brixham" and, when asked about taunts from the crowd, added "If you have a good kicker you do not hide him under a bushel" (*sic*) (15-0).

Glamorgan Wanderers had to cry off again, because of cup tie commitments in Wales. but a substitute fixture was made with South Wales Police at the County Ground (3-3). Remaining at home for the Boxing Day fixture, Exeter easily accounted for Exmouth (58-6). The next visitors, Taunton, "have not been having a particularly good season" according to the club programme. Although losing, the visitors did not allow Exeter to run away with the game (22-0). A Merit Table game at the Memorial Ground against Bristol saw Exeter slip to its heaviest defeat of the season (3-39). Then came a week's rest as the game at Bridgwater & Albion was cancelled due to fog.

The County Ground was in poor condition for the visit by Cross Keys who, by taking advantage of errors by Exeter, led by fourteen points with ten minutes left in the game. "A grandstand finish by Exeter failed to save them from their third home defeat of the season" was something of a journalistic over-statement as a late Mears penalty and a Staddon try, added to an earlier Jeffery try, still left a fair margin of defeat (11-18).

The new Merit Table structure meant that Exeter and Falmouth met for the first time since September 1962. The surface of the County Ground was still covered with sticky mud. One report stated that “Exeter well and truly crushed Falmouth” whilst another observed that the home side “will have to improve on this performance” if the team was to progress in competitive matches. After a bright start, play deteriorated and Exeter, after half time, “played some of their worst rugby of the season”. Only one try was scored and that was hotly disputed by Falmouth who thought Andy Jeffery had put a foot in touch before giving a scoring pass to Trevor Finbow (15-6). Putting that poor performance behind them, the players rose to the occasion, again at home, to defeat Torquay Athletic in a quarter-final tie for the Devon Cup (15-7).

Playing an away game for the first time in over a month, Exeter visited Weston super Mare, said to be having their worst season in over twenty years. To Exeter’s surprise the home side took the lead and the score was all-square at half time. Exeter then decided to open out in the second period and ran in five tries “as weak Weston wilted” (34-12). On returning to home territory Exeter found Barnstaple a tougher nut to crack and only just won a close encounter (12-9). Visiting Guy’s Hospital in London, Exeter won a clear victory (25-6).

In a high scoring game at the County Ground, Camborne might have considered themselves unlucky to lose as the difference between the teams lay with the boot of Jon Mears who kicked seventeen points (40-25). The young scrum-half’s ability to put the ball over the posts was called into action again against Devonport Services at The Rectory. On this occasion he landed five penalty goals against a Services side that was defensively determined and who “gave their best performance against Exeter for ten years” (19-13).

After seven consecutive victories Exeter went to Nottingham and lost, failing to register any points for the first time in the season (0-13). The programme notes for the next game announced that it was to be the last between the club and St. Luke’s College but one further was played the following season. On this occasion, after an enjoyable game, Exeter just shaded the student fifteen (18-12).

“Congratulations to seventeen players who put up such a fine performance whilst on tour in the North of England ... All the players played exceptionally well and made the tour a wonderful success. Well done lads!” So declared the programme notes on the team’s return from a two match expedition. On the Saturday Exeter faced Northern and although reduced to fourteen players after twenty minutes easily outshone their hosts in a game of attacking rugby (40-0). The following day, in bitterly cold conditions, Middlesbrough fought hard and Exeter had to defend stubbornly, especially in the last quarter of an hour, to maintain a lead gained early on (8-0). The Newcastle Journal described Exeter’s opponents as Northern Wanderers and a Middlesbrough XV containing veterans and colts.

Streatham-Croydon arrived at Exeter short of a player when one of their number missed the train. One of their club officials forsook his touch-judge’s flag to make up the number. The game came alive after half an hour when Bob Staddon, described as the ‘old man’ of the team, came up from full back to make a break on the right wing. The ball was passed across the field and 32-year-old Staddon was on hand on the left wing to take the scoring pass. A couple of minutes later centre Steve Webb made a decisive break to send wing Nigel Hayman over for another try. Much of the rest of the game developed into a kicking duel (20-15).

On the evening of Good Friday an unfamiliar looking Exeter side took on Universities Athletic Union and squeezed home by a single point. Highlight of the game was a try scored by Trevor Finbow, normally a front-five forward and now pressed into service as a wing three-quarter, who scored a crowd pleasing try after a spectacular charging run down the touchline from half-way like an infuriated bull (11-10). The following afternoon, in a Merit Table match, Exeter almost handed victory to Plymouth Albion after leading by nine points. This was a game “where no quarter was given or asked” and “was marred by some sordid outbreaks of fighting”. In the second half Albion

took the lead and then Exeter drew level. In the last thirty seconds the visitors muffed a penalty attempt from in front of the posts (12-12). The draw almost guaranteed Exeter a place in the John Player Cup for the following season. The traditional Easter Monday game with Moseley was planned to resume this year but the midland club decided to cease its tour of the south-west in favour of a match with Newport.

The end of season run-in proved to be the low spot of the season. Mindful of the Devon Cup Final game, an understrength team was sent to play Esher but came away vanquished by a substantial margin (3-31). An even bigger disappointment was to follow four days later when, at Beacon Park, Exeter met Plymouth Albion in the final. Having played two games thus far in the season against their local rivals and having won one and drawn the other, Exeter might have been excused for feeling confident, except that injuries had robbed the first fifteen of key members. Any hopes were dashed in what the club officially described as “a very disappointing game” (0-10).

The County Ground swan-song for the season was a meeting with Gloucester who included thirteen county players in their line-up. Exeter, in contrast, fielded a number of reserves. The front row consisted of props Trevor Harris aged 18 and Trevor Finbow aged 21 and hooker Andy Wostenholme borrowed from St. Luke’s College but they held their own against the powerful visiting pack. Exeter took the lead in the first minute with a penalty goal and Gloucester did not overtake their hosts until fifty minutes play had passed (6-14).

To end the season Exeter went to Redruth and defeated the home team whose full-back was sent off in the second half for striking an opponent (27-15)

The “A” displayed improved form in winning eighteen of 34 games played and losing the rest. The “B” played only 21 games winning eleven times. The Colts played 24 games winning eleven and drawing once.