

85th Year 1956-7

Johnny Stark's second season as captain brought no improvement in the playing record, indeed it proved to be the poorest set of results since the war. The captain played in his usual whole-hearted fashion but the team lacked thrust at half back and centre three-quarter. The defence also proved vulnerable on several occasions. There was no entry for the club in the Rugby Football Annual but records show that of some 43 games played less than a third were won. Six games ended in a draw.

The season began well with a second successive defeat of the Blackheath team on tour (12-6). This win was followed, three days later, by victory over Esher (11-8), who were also on a West Country tour. A draw at home against Torquay Athletic (6-6) was not the result that it should have been. The visitors won only two set scrums during the whole game and the local press thought that Exeter should have won by thirty points!

Any remaining illusions came to an abrupt halt when the team's weaknesses were exploited at Gloucester. After a "train journey packed to suffocation", Exeter could mount only a limited resistance to the power of their opponents (5-28). Worse was to follow. A mid-week match at Newton Abbot, that Exeter would have expected to win, ended in a dismal defeat (5-11). With confidence at a low ebb another formidable opponent, in the form of a London Welsh XV, visited the County Ground. On this occasion the pack performed better than the opposition although their efforts came in a losing cause (3-8). R. Lewis, who had joined the club at the start of the season after leading the Bristol University team for two years, was said to have had a tendency to kick too much.

A mid-week match at Teignmouth brought some brief respite (13-6) before Exeter travelled to face another onslaught, this time from Bristol. Exeter suffered what the Express & Echo described as "a humiliating defeat" at the Memorial Ground (0-31).

At home to Exmouth with three players on Devon duty, Exeter came close to another adverse result. An equalising try in the last minute saved the day (6-6). This game was followed by a mid-week meeting with the Royal Marine Corps XV that produced another disappointing score-line (3-19).

Exeter managed to gain so much of the ball during the away game with Saracens that commentators could not explain why Exeter lost (0-9).

From the end of October until the end of the year fortunes changed round completely. Of the next eleven games played, Exeter lost only one and drew two. Of the eight games won, seven were played at home. The fixtures could not be said to be the strongest on the list but the successes would have given the team heart for the second half of the season.

The sequence started with a mid-week home win against the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth (11-3) that was followed by a home victory over Teignmouth. On a County day the Exeter team had a distinctly "A" XV look but the improvised selection produced the desired result (19-5). A satisfying win over Taunton in a fast open game (16-6) preceded a scoreless draw with Devonport Services (0-0). Then came two more successes against Penzance & Newlyn (16-0) and the Royal Naval Engineering College (5-0). The first away match in the sequence produced the only defeat in this run, by Torquay Athletic (9-16).

The County Ground's next visitors, Redruth, went home defeated (5-3) and a week later Barnstaple lost by a similar score in a match that drew the headline "Mayhem in the Mire" (6-3). The Saturday before Christmas should have tested Exeter's winning ways but, when journeying to Bath, the Exeter team became fogbound at Taunton and a telephone call informed the opposition that the party was returning home.

To end the year Exeter won the Boxing Day meeting at Exmouth (8-0) and three days later drew with Old Blues for the second successive year (3-3). There the run of success for Exeter more or less ended. A dismal second half of the season found Exeter winning only three more senior games to set against sixteen losses and two draws.

The downhill run began with defeat at Taunton, on the first Saturday of the New Year, when the local side took revenge for a defeat earlier in the season in another open game (0-6). After a week off when a Devon game was staged at the County Ground, losses were suffered. The first of these came at the hands of Plymouth Albion in a fast attractive game that was missed by supporters who had stayed at home to watch a televised international match (3-13). Further losses followed versus Barnstaple (3-16) and London Hospital (3-9) both away from home. A heavy defeat at Weston was no doubt even more disappointing (3-25) but worse was to follow when the team sent to the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth for a mid-week game returned with only defeat to show for their efforts (6-11).

Then came three Saturdays when the senior team went undefeated, providing a glimmer of hope of an improvement. At home Exeter defeated Guy's Hospital on a heavy County Ground when the top surface was "oozy mud". Somewhat oddly, club secretary Tommy Roebuck said after the game "Had the side been any other than a London team, the match would not have been played" (6-0). Two visits in succession to Plymouth brought two precious draws. The result at Plymouth Albion (8-8) probably provided greater satisfaction than that against Devonport Services (0-0).

Three home defeats then signalled a return to poor displays when opponents won without too much effort. Against Ebbw Vale Exeter had the advantage in possession but too often decided to kick rather run (9-17), St. Luke's College (3-17) and Cheltenham (9-16). The customary week-end trip to Cornwall witnessed a Saturday defeat at Redruth (3-8) and a welcome win at St. Ives (17-6). In a tough end of season programme, Exeter suffered defeats in five home fixtures – Wasps (9-16), Newport (3-19), Bridgend (11-20), Old Cranleighans (8-21) and Moseley (11-20). Against Bridgend the score was equal at half time but then the visitors "punched holes in the weak Exeter tackling".

Conceding a penalty try in the Easter Saturday game against Old Cranleighans, Exeter helped the old boys team to a second successive win at the County Ground but it would prove to be their last in a series of fixtures that continued until 1968. The Monday game against Moseley epitomised Exeter's season. Exeter built up a lead of eleven points by half-time but the Midland visitors, whom the Birmingham Post had labelled "the most improved club team in England", helped themselves to twenty points in the second period without any reply from their hosts. A year after making his remarkable debut, John Jago was again in the news, by scoring both of Exeter's tries in this match.

On Tuesday of Easter week the County Ground welcomed another formidable opponent, Leicester. This time Exeter rose to the occasion to produce what was probably their best performance of the season, coming from behind to win the match. Scrum-half Lewis scored a try that was converted by Derek Atkins but mid-way through the second half the home side trailed by ten points. Atkins then kicked two penalty goals and a forward named Brown, on loan from Sidmouth, registered the try that clinched matters. "Exeter finishing strongly deservedly won" said the Birmingham Post (14-10).

In the final first class fixture of the campaign Exeter went down at Falmouth (5-11).