

81st Year 1952-3

After previous seasons that had been labelled “difficult” and then “enjoyable”, 1952-3 was described as “happy” although the playing record was not as good as that of recent campaigns. The fixture list was “a powerful one” so to win half of the 40 games played with three drawn was a creditable effort by the team. Near parity was achieved in the points scored – 306 against 309. The back division was said to be “useful” whilst the pack was “useful but not brilliant”. The forwards were often outweighed and beaten in the line-outs.

Jack Harrison, in his fifth year as captain, would not have been satisfied with his team’s performance for the first seven games. “Seldom has the record been so poor” commented the Express & Echo after a solitary victory and a draw that was set against five defeats. Even so, attractive rugby was played and at this early stage it was thought that the pack was a better unit than that of the previous season,

The opening fixture, on a Thursday evening at home against Torquay Athletic, could well have ended in defeat but for a last minute tackle by full-back Alf Hunt to prevent a try by the visitors. This would have been the only score of the game (0-0). Two days later, at home to Blackheath, the Exeter backs saw a lot of the ball but their movements were smothered by their opponents in a disappointing game (3-11). Another four days passed and a crowd of 2,000 assembled at Bristol to see the home team win by what appeared to be a comfortable margin. Exeter, territorially at least, were on top until Bristol scored four second half tries after a scoreless first period (0-18).

Another tough fixture followed three days later at Gloucester. This mid-week game attracted a crowd estimated at 5,000. Exeter, although losing again, showed an improvement in their play and were well in the hunt until the home side scored a try from a quick scrum-half break in the final minute (8-13).

The crowded September schedule gave the players only another three days to recover before Exeter faced an invitation XV raised by Bleddyn Williams, the renowned Wales and British Lions centre. The match was staged to raise funds for the Lynton and Lynmouth Relief Fund. An August storm of tropical intensity over Exmoor and its locality led to flooding that caused much devastation and the loss of 28 lives. The match raised £310 (£7,000). For the first twenty minutes of the game the Exeter team was mesmerised by the star-studded opposition that gave an object lesson in skilful handling. When it appeared that a rout might be on the cards, Exeter recovered and held their own, especially up front, during the second half. Exeter scored a try in each half through John Stark and A. Fernandez (6-26). Bleddyn Williams’s team played in the red shirts worn by the triple-crown winning team of the previous season.

“Back to the mundane” was the Express & Echo’s view of the following home game against St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. Roy Grace, an outside half who had joined the club from Exmouth, made his debut after being injured in the pre-season trial, but the new half back pairing was “not a happy unit” contributing to “an uninteresting game”. Nevertheless the first victory of the season was gained (9-0).

The next week, still at home, Exeter fell to another defeat – the fifth in seven games - this time against Devonport Services. The cause was said to be Exeter’s desire to play attractive football and keep the game open that led to their downfall. Twice Services came from behind to win by a single conversion (8-10). After a week off due to Devon playing Gloucestershire on the County Ground, Exeter travelled to Torquay Athletic. Following a poor showing two weeks previously, the partnership of Roy Pike and Roy Grace was described as “formidable”. This led to an all-round improvement in the play of team. “Exeter back to their post-war best” claimed one headline (19-6).

Despite that improvement Exeter then fell to another defeat. At Barnstaple on the day of a Devon county game, a number of younger players were drafted into the team, two of whom were injured during the course of play. The margin of defeat was again a single conversion kick (3-5). Recovery

was not too long in coming and Exeter began an unbeaten sequence that led up to Christmas. Two home games provided wins, firstly against Paignton (5-0) and then a mid-week meeting with the Royal Marines (14-8). Against Paignton, D.J. Thomas, a young second row player, had been promoted from the "B" XV but had the misfortune to break his nose half way through the game. Another debutant, Alan Hitchman scored the only try of the game (5-0). Retaining most of the same XV Exeter had a harder struggle against the Marines but won through better back play.

A visit to St. Ives saw the two teams actually face each other at Camborne as the new St. Ives pitch was not yet ready to stage the game. Despite a bitter northerly wind, Exeter gave an entertaining display of open rugby (12-0). Injuries were now mounting for the club but Exeter fielded a team good enough to defeat Weston super Mare in a grim battle in the mud on the County Ground. "There was little sparkle about the play!" (3-0).

One of the injured players was Alf Hunt who had broken his nose but such was his loyalty that, for the next match, he cycled from his place of work in Ilminster to Taunton to join the team as a spectator on its journey to Bath. Exeter came near to the first defeat by Bath since November 1938. Bath went ahead with a try but Exeter drew level through a well taken penalty from W.E. (Bill) Jones who at 17½ years of age was later to keep Alf Hunt out of the team. Exeter's covering was of a high order and the Bath backs were unable to penetrate again (3-3).

Another blank Saturday was the outcome of a pitch inspection before a game against St. Luke's College. Sheeting had been covering the waterlogged County Ground pitch and although it was thought the pitch to be just about playable, in view of a forthcoming England trial match at Exeter it was decided to rearrange the St. Luke's fixture.

Home victories against Devon opposition followed. The boot of full-back Bill Hones contributed seven of the eight points in the Teignmouth game that made the difference between the two sides (19-11). Three late tries ended stubborn resistance by Exmouth at the County Ground (17-5) in a match that preceded the International trial held on the Saturday before Christmas. The pitch must have recovered from its previous doubtful state as two further matches had by then been played on what would have been a muddy surface. As it turned out the pitch was not the problem - it was the weather which was said to have been terrible.

Boxing Day brought disappointment when Exmouth, on their own ground, turned the tables on Exeter who had won the meeting two weeks previously. On "a bumpy pitch" at Cranford, the home team put up a magnificent defence but showed little inclination to handle the ball. One chance came their way - a penalty goal - whilst Exeter took and missed seven similar attempts (0-3).

The next day Exeter managed to reverse the previous score line in defeating Old Blues on a swampy County Ground where the players became anonymous in their mud stained kit. The visitors gained a lot of possession but were kept at bay by Roy Pike's tactical kicking. It was a cross-kick from him that led to the only score of the game, a try by winger John Stark after 25 minutes. The Exeter wing-forward A.E.G. (Alan) Hitchman, an Old Blue, played "a storming game" (3-0).

A narrow victory at Weston super Mare saw in the New Year. On a dry pitch but with a cold northerly wind blowing down the ground, the home team took advantage of the conditions and scored a try. In the second half Exeter equalised and on this occasion a successful kick at goal, a conversion by Tony Lee, won the game (5-3). A trip to the capital to play London Hospital brought a disappointing two point defeat. The club programme was to comment "Exeter ... still cannot understand why they lost to London Hospital ... after attacking for 80 per cent of the game. We still seem most unlucky with our goal kicks". According to the Express & Echo "Exeter should have won in a canter" (9-11). The problem with place kicking was again evident in a home success over Barnstaple when only one of five tries was converted. For the victory honours went to the back row of Dick Manley, Michael Wright and Alan Hitchman (17-5).

Another home win followed - a defeat of Plymouth Albion. Despite dominating the game, all the Exeter scoring came in the second half (17-5) Then came a surprise home defeat by Old Millhillians. Despite a good supply of ball the Exeter backs did not function well. Due to injury to Roy Grace, A.H.J. Holland was promoted from the "A" to play at stand-off. He coped well with the blustering wind and occasional showers but it was said that he was troubled by the low sun. A half-time positional switch did not produce the desired effect. Meanwhile the old boys winger, J. Robert, who later gained caps for England scored two tries. (3-11). A second successive defeat came at Clifton where the visitors found themselves nineteen points down. A come-back was staged but it was not enough. Holland retained his place in the team and both sides were praised for producing an open game (11-19).

When playing host to Wasps, it was Exeter's turn to register an unexpected win in what the press labelled "Tilt's Match". The Hele's School XV captain, 18 year old J.G. Tilt, was selected to play centre alongside his school rugby master Jack Harrison. It was Tilt who made the break to send Johnny Stark in for a try. The conversion failed but it was pointed out that the kicker, Tony Lee, had been married on the morning of the match. Stark touched down for another score in the second half (6-0).

Two more home victories came next, against Redruth (13-0) and Guy's Hospital (13-6). For a mid-week charity fixture Exeter combined with St. Luke's College to field a team to face a Devon XV in aid of the Relief Fund for the East Coast Flood Disaster that had occurred a few weeks earlier. A crowd of 1,500 attended the game that had to be cut short by seven minutes due to fog. At that point the Combined XV led by nine points to the county team's eight.

March began with another surprise defeat. The surprise was not so much that Exeter lost to Plymouth Albion but the margin of defeat – the score-line of the previous encounter six weeks earlier was reversed. With a dry pitch at Beacon Park and on a fine day, Exeter's sole try came only as a consolation (3-17). Seven days later Exeter returned to Plymouth to face Devonport Services where, in a closely contested game, revenge was exacted for an early season defeat. Five of the points scored by the Services came four minutes from no-side (9-8). Travelling further afield to Aberavon, Exeter lost after Tilt and Grace were injured during the game. Both of these players, along with Alf Hunt, were prominent in a defence that was key on the day as Exeter gained little set piece possession. All the scoring came in the second half (0-9).

For the rearranged fixture with St. Luke's College, "N.K.S.", the Express & Echo rugby reporter, was at his dramatic best. "There was nothing left on the clock except the maker's name and thirty seconds" when "the light was fast fading" and with the score standing at six points each, Roy Pike cross kicked and Johnny Stark went over in the corner with 3,000 spectators roaring deliriously. A feature of this game was the tight play of Brian Homer who out hooked the legendary Bryn Meredith of Wales and Lions fame (9-6). This match was the first of seven consecutive games at home for Exeter.

At the end of March a game that could have been won was left drawn when "many penalties were missed" facing Cheltenham (0-0). The Easter programme commenced with a "thrill-packed" but narrow victory over Old Cranleighans (18-16). Then, over a period of nine days, four games ended in defeat though it should be noted that the opponents represented some of the leading clubs in the country at the time. On Easter Monday Moseley proved to be "Too Good Behind For Exeter" according to a Birmingham press report. Exeter did gain a lot of possession but could not break the defence of the visitors. Moseley opened the scoring with a penalty before Brian Homer touched down after the ball had been kicked over the visitor's line. A second half try won the game for Moseley (3-6). Leicester paid Exeter the compliment that the Tuesday game was the toughest on their tour. Exeter finished with fourteen men on the field (5-13). Without skipper Harrison Exeter were somewhat disorganised against Ebbw Vale though the pack stood up well against much heavier opponents (3-9).

“Never has Exeter tackled so resolutely” said “N.K.S.” in the game against Newport when outside half Grave outshone his Welsh counterpart but a fight-back in the second half was to no avail (9-19). This last game saw an attendance of 2,500 at the County Ground.

Then came Exeter’s turn to go on tour – the regular two match trip to Cornwall. On a Friday evening Penzance & Newlyn was defeated in an open game in which Dick Manley was the prominent player (11-8). “Exeter’s second game of the week-end tour in Cornwall, was as disappointing as the first was delightful” said “N.K.S.”. Redruth’s game was based on kick-and-rush tactics (3-17).

The season was “brought to a fine end” with the defeat of Bridgend at the County Ground. According to the Western Mail “Bridgend should not have lost this match by as many as five points. Indeed on their share of the play they should have won”. It was fitting that this match saw tries scored by wingers Gerry Brown and Johnny Stark who had touched down some thirty times between them during the season (8-3).

Disappointment was expressed at the attendance in July at the Supporters’ Club Annual General Meeting. Here it was reported that programme sales had fallen from nearly 11,000 to about 8,500. A week later at the Exeter Football Club A.G.M. it was evident that these figures came as a result of a fall in gates at ordinary club matches. The International trial in December brought in £100 (£2,300) and the bank balance stood at £160 (£3,700). The game in aid of the Lynton/Lynmouth disaster fund and the match for the East Coast Disaster Flood Relief fund raised (£310 (over £7,000).

Club President W.A. Ashford declared his intention to stand down as he was approaching 82 years of age. This was to be a somewhat prophetic announcement.