

123rd Year 1994-5

Having held a place in the third level of English rugby since 1985, initially in Merit Table C followed by seven seasons in Division 3 of the National League system, Exeter was to face relegation for the first time at the end of the 1994-5 season. The team ended up occupying last position in the table having won only three and drawing one of its eighteen league games. League points totalled only seven, leaving Exeter some six points adrift of what would have been a position of safety.

Andy Maunder was elected captain for the fifth season in a row and centre Andy Turner became his vice-captain. Coach Dave Wiggins had departed for Bristol and flanker Paul Westgate, despite his lack of coaching experience, took the post in his place.

From early season it was apparent that the club would struggle to maintain its Division 3 status. After an early win away at Morley, eight league games were lost in succession, the worst run in the club's competitive history. Director of Rugby, Bob Staddon, found the situation difficult to explain. He could point out that in three games the opportunity to win was lost through missed goal kicking chances. The games in question all took place at the County Ground before Christmas. Talisman outside half and leading goal kicker, Andy Green, was recovering from knee ligament surgery and did not resume playing league games until the New Year. Another weakness was the inability to score tries – only eleven were scored in eighteen league games.

Exeter saved its best performances for the cup competitions. In the Pilkington Cup the club won through to the final eight before losing to Wasps. The Devon Cup was won for the seventh time in succession with a win over Brixham at Astley Park.

A mid-week match at Weston super Mare on the first day of the season saw Exeter win by a single point, with a team that included half a dozen players being given a trial run in the senior team (20-19). Stronger selections for the two home games that followed brought two further victories, with more comfortable margins – Redruth (40-25) and Devon, captained by Exeter coach Paul Westgate (8-0).

The first league game of the season, at Morley, also resulted in a win but this effort was later described as a false dawn coming as it did before a run of eight consecutive defeats (13-6).

At Rosslyn Park, a game that could have been won, was lost by two points (9-11) but a defeat at Blackheath was a much more clear cut result (7-21). To end September, Exeter entertained Crediton and won with a team containing several irregular first team players including fly-half Meeku Patidar who scored eighteen points (33-12).

League action resumed with a home meeting with Rugby Lions, a team that eighteen months previously had been playing in Division 1. The game ended in what Exeter thought to be “a controversial defeat” (11-15).

Next on the fixture list came the Pilkington Cup second round tie at North Walsham for which Exeter took to the air again by flying to Norwich. Four tries were registered, one of which was a penalty try, to boost the winning score-line (32-7).

The reality of League rugby soon followed with three successive games that ended in defeat. A game at home against Harrogate was one that Bob Staddon thought should have been won, the club losing by just one point (13-14). At Otley the team could manage to score just one dropped goal (3-16) whilst at home against Bedford, just one penalty goal was landed as Exeter's contribution to the final score (3-29).

With league relegation now a steadily looming prospect, Exeter had to refocus for the Third Round of the Pilkington Cup. Unbeaten Launceston, on their own ground, would not have been an easy task but four tries by the backs dispelled any fears of an upset (30-7). Seven days later a visit to Clifton for a

league match ended in another defeat (15-29). Two non competitive games allowed the team to regroup and produce a good performance against Bristol. Although the contest ended in defeat, the team showed what could be done against a top division side (10-15). Four days after this loss, Exeter demolished Exmouth at the Imperial Ground scoring nine tries to one (61-7).

Meeting Tiverton at the County Ground, in the first round of the Devon Cup, Exeter was not able to repeat its previous performance and the team “looked good for only twenty minutes” whilst winning (30-3).

In a friendly encounter at Beacon Park against Plymouth Albion, Exeter squeezed home by three points (26-23). The following Friday Exeter played host to first division Bath, in a game to celebrate the official opening of the clubhouse extension. A later club programme described it as “A splendid encounter”. Bath, fielding a strong XV made a slow start on a heavy ground and Exeter went ahead with a Jason Thomas try converted by Meeku Patidar. Soon after Bath began applying pressure and by the end of the game had scored eight tries. The only second half response from Exeter came via a penalty try (14-53).

In the Pilkington Cup fourth round Exeter had been drawn at home to play Rugby Lions. It proved to be a dour game in which the visitors scored the only try but Exeter won through three penalty goals from Meeku Patidar. Despite the manner of the victory it was regarded by the club as revenge for the earlier league defeat by their opponents and it was said to have provided “a tremendous lift” (9-7).

A Boxing Day fixture against the President’s XV ended in defeat but the game saw a welcome return appearance of Andy Green for the invitation team (12-20). On New Year’s Eve the club extended grateful thanks to Crediton who agreed to play a game at late notice, on a playable local pitch as the home ground at Blagdon was unplayable. Exeter was thus able to maintain some playing continuity and duly won (38-6).

The second half of the season began with a home game against fellow league strugglers, Richmond. Neither team had much to show for their efforts so far and on this occasion the London club showed its superiority (3-14). In contrast, the following week, Exeter travelled to London and defeated Rosslyn Park albeit by the narrowest of margins, but it was enough to end the sequence of eight league defeats (11-10). Even after this win Exeter remained at the foot of the table and there they remained until the end of the campaign.

The following Friday, Exeter sent a team containing only a handful of first team regulars to Gloucester for an evening game. It proved to be a tough experience for the inexperienced players (5-72).

Despite its low league ranking, Exeter remained well supported, as witnessed by the army, composed of largely volunteers, who laboured to make the County Ground playable for the Pilkington Cup Fourth Round match against Aspatria. Some 30 tons of sand were spread over the pitch during the two and a half days before kick-off.

On the day the performance by Exeter was said to be “not impressive”. The first half efforts against the wind were nearly negated by a penalty strewn second period. Exeter were leading by two points at the interval, thanks to a try by Andy Maunder and an Andy Green penalty goal. Green missed only one of four kicks at goal whilst Aspatria missed four out of six. An interception try by Simon Dovell in the 81st minute boosted the home score. “The winning margin was a trifle flattering”, commented a club programme, “but by that stage of the season they felt entitled to a lucky break or two” and so the club entered the last eight of the senior cup competition (18-6).

Domestic encounters now took over. A Friday evening win at home over Torquay Athletic by a mixed strength team (15-10) preceded a Sunday Devon Cup Quarter Final game at Okehampton. Often a

tough assignment, on this occasion Exeter appeared to have won without too much trouble but according to Paul Easterbrook the performance “was less than impressive” (32-13).

Having gained two points in the previous league game and having won through to the last eight of the Pilkington Cup, Exeter might have thought that fortunes had changed, but, in the words of Dave Barton of The Western Morning News, “For a team that played most of the rugby, Exeter should have been disappointed with just one point from Saturday’s National League Three draw with Morley”. Exeter did not make the most of the chances that came their way and led by only a single point at half-time having played with the wind. Morley had already been gifted one try and shortly after the resumption an Exeter error gave the visitors another score that enabled them to take the lead. Playing into the wind for the final half hour, Exeter, showing notable resolve, provided the opportunity for Andy Green to level the score at the end of the game (12-12). From this game Exeter gained their first league point of the season at the County Ground.

Preparations for the home Pilkington Cup Quarter Final against Wasps involved the application of yet more sand to the pitch leading to press headlines like “Beach boys have a ball” from The Observer and “Exeter refuse to bury heads in sand” from The Guardian. A further Observer comment likened the consistency of the playing surface to that of “a warm treacle tart”.

The Guardian heading conveyed the spirit shown by the home team when faced with the prospect of meeting one of the country’s leading clubs. Lacking possession from the line out, Exeter’s back row, led by Paul Westgate, denied the Wasps much of the ball from the loose play. “They were quite outstanding” said The Times.

Wasps managed to score five tries in all, not through defensive weakness but as a result of clever variations of play. Exeter failed to score but “That was about all they failed to do” said Mark Reason of The Times. Despite the conditions underfoot the crowd of between 4-5,000 was treated to much open play. “Everyone was a winner” commented Paul Easterbrook (0-31).

The effort shown the previous week was not maintained as the next league game was lost at Harrogate (3-17). This defeat was followed by a somewhat fortunate win in the Devon Cup Semi-Final against Barnstaple at Pottington Road. “We were very lucky” said disappointed player-coach, Paul Westgate. Exeter fielded a reserve pairing at half-back along with other players being given the opportunity to prove their worth. Barnstaple’s approach was not one of damage limitation but one of determination to win. This they very nearly achieved. Exeter took an early lead with a dropped goal, but did not score again until the 76th minute, by which time the home team led by five points. Then, following a five metre scrum, No.8 John Batchelor was impeded in the act of scoring and a penalty try was awarded. The simple conversion was enough to gain Exeter the victory (10-8).

The unimpressive Devon Cup performance was followed by another league defeat, against Rugby at Webb Ellis Road. A try by Mark Chatterton late in the game Exeter a chance but Andy Green’s conversion attempt from wide-out bounced back into play off the cross-bar, thus denying the club the lead. The home team then went on to score again before the final whistle (11-17). Next came Exeter’s only home win of the season, against Otley (18-11).

The final month of the league season reflected Exeter’s struggle throughout the campaign. On the 1st of April at Bedford the team suffered a heavy defeat (10-23) and a week later lowly Richmond, at home, dismissed Exeter’s challenge in what Paul Easterbrook labelled “a debacle” (5-41). As far as the club was concerned the only notable achievement in this game was attributed to skipper Andy Maunder who, on his 29th birthday, became the first player to achieve 100 league appearances.

At home results were no better. Clifton, who were to be relegated alongside Exeter, won (6-15) whilst the final ignominy came against Backheath at the end of the month (0-28).

To salvage some pride, a week before the latter game, the club retained the Devon Cup against Brixham at Astley Park. This seventh consecutive title constituted a record for the competition.

In rain and dreadful conditions underfoot, running rugby was all but impossible. Exeter formulated a plan to contain the fire of Brixham in the first half and then to dominate up front in the second. Whereas the plan at Barnstaple in the Semi-Final so nearly went awry, this time all went well. Brixham could manage only a penalty goal in the first period. Exeter then took over with four tries, all from close to the scrum. Maunder touched down twice, once either side of the interval, Rob Baxter was in charge of the ball in a push-over and Rob Walker crashed over after a series of driving mauls (22-3).