

55th Year 1926-7

In contrast to the experiences of the previous season a much better playing record showed that Exeter was making progress on the field of play. This time, despite losing the opening three fixtures, and experiencing a run of five consecutive defeats at the end of the programme of matches, the overall playing record showed a distinct improvement.

With the return of important matches to the County Ground increased interest in rugby football within the city and its neighbourhood was demonstrated by the fact that some ninety playing members had joined the club. Three teams were regularly fielded and on occasions a fourth team made an appearance.

Willie Brock was the elected captain. Son of a former Exeter player, also called Willie, he had been educated at Exeter School and had made his first team debut at Easter 1920. He made very regular appearances amongst the forwards from then on and also undertook the duties of goal kicking from time to time. Vice-captain was Alf Woodrow the regular scrum-half who was partnered this season at outside-half by Eddie Munt who joined the club having previously played for Honiton, Sidmouth and Devon. Munt's first appearance for the club was delayed when he suffered a motor-cycle accident.

"Exeter experiences a shock" ran one headline when the team lost the opening game at home to Taunton (9-18). Displaying a "want of practice" overall, the forwards required "a little more dash". At Bridgwater & Albion the poor start continued with a heavy defeat (3-25). A mid-week game at Tiverton often proved to be a difficult fixture and this season a weak team was not able to beat the home team (5-11).

The first two victories soon followed, the first being at home against Paignton (9-5). A second mid-week evening game provided a more satisfactory outcome. In poor light at Sidmouth, Exeter was on top for most of the game but it took two late tries by D.P. Wilcocks to secure a narrow victory (6-3).

At Barnstaple against the current Devon Cup holders Exeter was unable to end the local club's unbeaten run for the season (0-6). A "much improved" Exeter performance where "for the first time this season the Exeter forwards pushed their opponents off the ball" led to the defeat of Wellington (11-5). Then travelling to Paignton the home team enjoyed a lucky win by scoring a dropped goal and a try to two tries (6-7).

For the first time in fifteen years the team travelled to London. Exeter lacked the services of Jones, Rew and Braddon, who were assisting Devon, whilst opponents Edgware included in their line-up the Bristol and England full-back B.S. Chantrill. The result was described as a creditable draw (8-8).

At home once more Exeter faced Barnstaple again. This meeting was seen as "a revival of the old days" when a special train was run from the north Devon town. The result - a draw - was "a correct indication of the run of play" (3-3). Exeter then received a visit from Sidmouth. The atmosphere for this game differed from the previous week, the match being ill-tempered during which "some of the visiting forwards were inclined to tackle players when they had not the ball". Exeter prevailed (13-8). Two senior fixtures had been made for this date. A Reserve XV was sent to face Royal Naval College Devonport where it suffered the consequences (3-36).

Heavy rain led to an unfit pitch and a cancellation at Torquay Athletic. A mid-week game was played at the County Ground against Blundell's School. The result was a surprise, a win for the visitors, but "Exeter could not begrudge their victory" (6-9). Captaining the school was Christopher Lee Ashford, son of the Exeter president William Ashford and nephew of B.W.L. Ashford. C.L. Ashford went on to gain a Blue at Cambridge University. He played for Barnstaple as well as Exeter and Devon whilst practising as a solicitor.

Eddie Munt missed his train connection for the next game at Plymouth Albion and so Exeter fielded only fourteen men. Beacon Park was "a mud pit" and the visitors did well to score a converted try to set against their opponents' two penalty goals and a penalty try (5-9). A char-a-banc was probably a surer way to get a full team to Brixham for the next match but the game still ended in defeat (0-9). A double header against the seaside team saw Exeter disappointingly on the losing side again at the County Ground (0-8). On the road once more Exeter took the short trip to Exmouth where the team gained a "meritorious victory". Although having to defend for most of the game Exeter took their chances during a ten minute period of the second half to score three tries (11-3).

There was no game the following week as the newly refurbished County Ground played host to an international trial match. The Supporters Club marked the occasion by producing a much admired 12 page programme that included information about the Exeter club. Proceeds from programme sales were donated to grandstand appeal. One estimate suggested that there was a crowd of 10,000 in attendance but a local reporter thought that "play was not up to the standard of the previous trial held on the ground thirty years earlier"!

The holiday period began with a fixture against new opposition – a team representing Hele's School Past and Present (13-3). This result appears to have been included in the official record for the season but a Christmas Eve meeting with Devon Nomads was fulfilled by the Reserves (5-9).

Before the post-Christmas encounter with Ebbw Vale the club flag was lowered in memory of former player James Sayer who had died at his home in Heavitree. Despite fielding a make-shift half back combination and missing other senior players, Exeter put in a good performance to defeat the team from Wales (6-3). The following day saw another home victory when Barnstaple was overcome in another closely fought game (8-0).

Another home fixture on New Year's Day produced another victory this time against Devonport Services who had lost nine first choice players who were representing the Navy on the day (22-3).

Exeter was unable to reproduce its recently improved form at Taunton (8-19) caused partly by the absence of Jones, Rew and Braddon on Devon duty. Three more defeats followed. The game at home against Torquay Athletic turned out to be "a scramble amongst the forwards" (6-11).

For a match at Cardiff the Devon selectors requested that Exeter include J. Scargill, a Brixham centre-three-quarter in the team. Exeter "gave a good account of themselves" on a pitch that was in a deplorable state after rain and frost. The Western Mail was quite complimentary stating "Exeter is a club that Cardiff would do well to retain on the fixture card, as they proved themselves capable of serving up the brightest type of rugby under fair conditions" (5-6). Cardiff was also recorded as playing out a draw at Neath on this day. In an

official history of Cardiff R.F.C. the fixtures against Exeter played in 1926-7 and 1927-8 are described as being fulfilled by “Cardiff 2nd (First) XV”.

More disappointment came at home against Exmouth when, after being ten points to the good with ten minutes to play, Exeter managed to lose (10-11). As Devon was playing a county championship semi-final at Exeter the following week a scheduled game against Edgware was cancelled.

Facing Barnstaple for the fourth time this season Exeter resumed its winning form in north Devon (6-3). The game was notable for the number of free kicks awarded by the referee “being very strict in the matter of putting the ball into the scrum straight”. Wellington away again proved to be a stumbling block (0-14).

A run of three victories redressed the balance. In far from ideal conditions Combined Colleges almost literally went under. Both teams were “sliding about on a mud covered pitch that squelched and gurgled under the players’ feet” (14-0). Conditions were even worse for a visit by London University. “The turf was in such appalling condition that the game should never have been played”. But this was a guarantee match and so it went ahead ankle deep in mud with parts of the pitch under water. In addition the players had to endure heavy rain and a keen wind and “for a portion of the game the elements were so bad that only one touch judge braved them”. Unsurprisingly the attendance was very meagre (8-3).

Possibly due to Exeter sending a Reserve team the previous season Weston cancelled the next fixture but a game at home was arranged against the 1st Gloucestershire Regiment instead. Billy Braddon scored a hat-trick of tries in a comfortable win (17-3). Four days later Exeter at home was caught napping by a youthful side from the Royal Naval College Devonport (6-9).

Exeter could not send its best team to Sidmouth but it was “good enough to effect a draw” (3-3). At Devonport Services Exeter led by eight points with ten minutes to go but despite scoring another last minute try they allowed their opponents to register seventeen points (11-17). “The pack tired towards the end of the game” commented one reporter. If this game proved tiring then the forwards were to experience a relentless and even more tiring end to the season.

A hectic programme of eleven games in the four week period commencing the 23rd of March had been organised. First came Tiverton at home when Exeter proved “superior all round (21-0). Stiffer opposition was provided by the new Devon Cup holders Newton Abbot. At home Exeter effected another draw in a game spoilt by rain (3-3). Exeter were unfortunate to lose the services of A.E. Reeve early on due to a damaged leg. He was described as “a genuine player, not a leaner”.

A slight set-back was experienced at Torquay Athletic (3-9) before the team again registered three wins in a row. The first of these came about in unsatisfactory circumstance. Plymouth Albion despite asking Exeter for a guarantee (£10/£300) for the fixture actually fielded two supposed “first teams” on the day, the other facing Barnstaple. In the event the Plymouth teams lost both games and Exeter refused to pay the guarantee (8-3).

A mid-week game against a club Veterans XV (29-14) was more of a social prelude to the Annual Dinner at the Rougemont Hotel. Comments during the many speeches during the

evening reflected the views and attitudes concerning the game at this time. Former R.F.U. President, Thomas Carter Pring, was of the opinion that “it would be a good thing if the legislators went to sleep for a while” and “in the old days there was not so much whistling and refereeing as at present”. He then added “we must remember that Rugby is played as a recreation and we must do nothing to kill that”.

Three days later Exeter enjoyed their final victory of the season. Well matched Exeter and Bridgwater & Albion provided an enjoyable contest that left the “spectators delighted” (16-10). The delight must have evaporated quickly as, in now customary style, Exeter lost all their remaining games.

A mid-week evening game at Teignmouth found Exeter playing the better football but their backs making too many handling errors (5-8). Back at home Exeter conceded the highest points total of the season, Old Blues overwhelmed the home team whose defence collapsed in the second half (11-31).

Facing Cardiff two days later Exeter again “failed to stay the pace” and tackling was “not good on the hard ground” but the score line was no disgrace (13-19). The margin was worse the following day against Notts County when Exeter fielded a weak team that included three first team debutants. The tackling was again poor (3-19). In summing up a reporter concluded that “Exeter Rugby Club’s Easter Egg, unlike the curate’s, has turned out to be not even good in parts”.

The normal season was rounded-off with another heavy defeat at Newton Abbot though the score flattered the home side. The game was played at great speed and was “brim-full of incident” with Exeter failing to take chances that might have altered the result (13-29).

Players however had one more Saturday for which their services were required. On 30th April 1927 the Exeter club staged its first seven-a-side competition as a fund raising event. Although the shortened form of the rugby game had been played in Scotland for over 40 years, only the year before had the first major competition been staged in England – the Middlesex Sevens held at Twickenham.

Advertised as a full day’s entertainment for 1/- (£1.50) the ties were interspersed with other events on the County Ground. Eight teams comprised of club players made up the first round. The four winners then met four invitation teams namely Honiton, North Tawton, St. Luke’s and the University College of the South West. The last named beat Honiton in the final by thirteen points to five. Unfortunately during the afternoon’s play the veteran Exeter player Sam Chudley broke a leg.

It would appear that proceedings were too protracted and many spectators left the ground before the end. During the day a Shilling Raffle for a Singer motor-car was held, all proceeds going towards the Shilling Fund to pay off the loan on the grandstand.

The Annual General Meeting held at the Guildhall was well attended and the various reports illustrated the progress made by the club. On the playing field the Chiefs had played 42 games of which seventeen had been won and four drawn. The record would have appeared to have been much better but for the five losses in April. It must be pointed out that yet again it is difficult to reconcile the official records with match reports. Willie Brock, the captain, and fellow forward Tom Browning played in all 42 games.

The “A” team played 27 games of which 13 ended in victory while two were drawn, The “B” XV won fifteen of 23 games played. As some 90 playing members had joined at the start of the season attempts were made to field a 4th XV on a regular basis but a shortage of playing fields meant that the club could only provide games for only half the playing numbers on a regular basis.

Fund raising was a major topic of the financial report. Various novel schemes were undertaken with varying success. The Shilling Fund to pay off the outstanding loan was to be a long-term effort. Forming part of this scheme the Motor-car raffle brought in only £120 (£3600). Other innovations did well enough including the Seven-a-side Tournament and the Annual Ball. This latter event at the Rougemont Hotel was attended by 550 people who found the dance-floor marked out like a rugby pitch complete with posts. The ball-room was decorated in the club colours of black and white and the programme included a new dance that included a “rugby scrum”! After all these efforts £2,500 (£75,000) remained to be raised to clear the debt.

Working profit on the season amounted to £134 (£4,000). Easter matches were financially unsuccessful but the International Trial brought in £189 (£2,700). Overall the financial situation was deemed to be satisfactory. New entrances had been installed at the County Ground and improvements made to the grandstand. One worry was the cycle track around the ground on which £160 (£4,800) had been spent over three years whilst the income from this facility had raised only £20 (£600).

In March it was announced that one of the club’s leading players W.E. (Bill) Braddon was to depart on the 1st April to immigrate to South America where he had obtained a position with a meat packing company in the Argentine. A native of Ide Braddon had attended Allhallows School and was employed by Canns at Ide. He started playing senior rugby with the revived but short lived Exeter Oaks club.

His talents as a wing-three-quarter were soon reported to Exeter for whom he made his debut aged 17 in November 1923. As far as records show he played well over 100 games for the club scoring over 50 tries and registering nearly 200 points in all. He played in all four of Devon’s County Championship games in 1926-7.

A very popular player, dinners were held to mark his departure. At one of these events the Exeter Chairman and ex-International, T.S. Kelly acknowledged that “the Exeter club was losing one of the best players it has ever possessed”.

After arrival Bill Braddon soon started playing rugby with the Buenos Aires club. In July 1927 he was selected to represent Argentina against the touring Great Britain XV. The tourists won the match 37-0. This appearance represented his only international “cap”.

The story of Billy Braddon has a tragic ending. In February 1930 he was travelling by taxi in Buenos Aires when one of the vehicle’s wheels collapsed and it collided with a lamp-post. Braddon was knocked unconscious but he was seriously burned when the taxi burst into flames. He died the following day. He was just 23 years of age.

