

112th Year 1983-4

At the beginning of the season coach Les May noted in the club programme that “the team is young and generally inexperienced, they may need time to settle down”. At the same time the new captain Phil Treseder observed “Fixtures in the first couple of months provide a stern test as always”. As might have been predicted by many club supporters it was to be another difficult season.

The season began with two away fixtures against local team. Exeter was then to face Pontypridd at the County Ground. The Welsh visitors went away victorious after an encouraging performance by the home side (13-24). A first visit to Orrell brought a heavier defeat (12-34). September ended with a much needed win over Camborne in a Merit Table match. Exeter was in control up front and winger Peter Drewett touched down three tries (24-3). During October the team suffered two narrow defeats – away at Nottingham (16-17) and at home to Saracens (6-7). Had these results been reversed the season’s record might have taken on a much different look. At Paignton, after a morning kick-off, Exeter won as expected but until after the home side had given the visitors a wake-up call. Just after half time Paignton scored two quick tries to reduce the Exeter lead to three points after which the visitors took the game away from their hosts (10-29).

At Devonport Services there was “a fast furious non-stop battle from the word go with the better side Exeter breathless but comfortable winners” (21-3). After defeat at Glamorgan Wanderers (9-21), Exeter, at home, then faced Wasps who “struggles to win” (21-25). A week later, when Devon was playing a County Championship game, Exeter beat Tiverton at the County Ground by a comfortable margin (31-9). Another Merit Table win at Camborne followed when former Camborne player, Malcolm Collins out-kicked his opposite number (16-7) but Exeter’s standing in the South & South-West Merit Table was put into perspective by a defeat at Plymouth Albion at the start of December (19-9).

At the County Ground a week later, both Exeter and Headingley were ready to kick-off on time but the appointed referee from the Cornwall Society was nowhere to be seen. On his arrival at the ground Bob Staddon, committee man and former player and coach, who had refereed a schools game in the morning, was immediately drafter in to take up the whistle. After a brief word with both teams, he started the game some twenty five minutes late. As far as the play was concerned “once gain it was a story of lack of power and weight up front” that led to Exeter’s downfall. A Rob Johnstone penalty goal was the only response by the home side to the visitor’s five tries (3-27). The referee was praised by both teams. Peter Winterbottom once of Exeter featured in the Headingley team.

Before Christmas a welcome away win was registered at Imber Court against Metropolitan Police (12-4) but this was the last significant victory until February. Immediately after the holiday break the team went to Torquay Athletic and lost narrowly (15-18). The first home game of the New Year brought a disappointing defeat in another Merit Table match. The visitors, Launceston, registered the team’s only win of the season in this competition (22-25). Next came another defeat by a single point – the third of the season – against Rosslyn Park at the County Ground (9-10).

Two potentially tough games then had to be cancelled, an away fixture with Bristol and a home game against Liverpool who had to cry off due to involvement in the John Player Cup. January ended on a low note when on the last day of the month Exeter University won under the County Ground floodlights (7-11). February began more brightly when a notably solid and workmanlike Exeter defeated Cheltenham (22-0). Over a month passed before Exeter registered another victory.

At the County Ground Exeter lost to Plymouth Albion in a Merit Table encounter by a single point – the fourth such defeat (9-10) before subsiding in two away matches to Newbridge (14-64) and Blackheath (14-33). Back at home Exeter went down to Bath who scored four tries to the home team’s solitary penalty goal. As described by the visitors the game came “to a sour conclusion” when

a dozen players became involved in a fracas following which Bath and England prop, Gareth Chilcott, was sent from the field for head-butting (3-27).

March began with another dip in the club's fortunes. Exeter had progressed to the third round of the Devon Cup competition by means of home victories over Old technicians (58-3) and Ilfracombe (56-12). The draw now took the club to play an away tie against Devon & Cornwall Police who had knocked Exeter out of the previous season's competition by a single point in a low scoring game. On this occasion the humiliation was more complete. "Exeter's Cup Of Woe" ran one headline. The report ended "For Exeter a season that opened so promisingly is fast becoming a repeat of last year's nightmare" (3-28).

With confidence at a low ebb, Exeter travelled to Launceston for Merit Table game/ Showing character and determination Exeter came away with a much needed victory (9-3).

In mid-March Exeter entertained a team representing the Midwest R.F.U. of America. In the mid-week game the trans-Atlantic visitors pressed hard but Exeter won through (24-18). From this point until the end of the season when faced with leading English and Welsh clubs, Exeter lost all five games, some heavily and yet one more by a single point – the fifth! The results were v Maesteg (3-22), v Bristol (3-52), v Glamorgan Wanderers (3-14), Bedford (17-29) and finally v Gloucester (9-58).

One notable feature for the season was the goal kicking of full back Malcolm Collins was amassed a club records of 405 points.