

We are delighted to publish this interview with Bob Staddon. Bob, a long-standing member of our club and a Trustee, played for Exeter and represented the South West for many years; he was also a coach and Director of Rugby at Exeter. In his younger days he was a very good athlete, and a keen cricketer, representing Devon many times.

Bob, tell us how it all started, were you born in Devon, did you go to school in Devon?

I'm an Exeter boy born in my uncle's home in Buckerell Avenue, Exeter. My father was in the gas industry and he was moved around the county. My early memories of sport were playing football for Ottery St Mary Primary School. For a term I went to The King's School at Ottery; this was my first connection with rugby. My father was a very good soccer player who played locally for Frienhay (a very good Exeter amateur side) and Tiverton Town so I grew up kicking the round ball but as soon as I went into secondary education I started to play rugby. My father was moved to Ilfracombe where I was lucky enough to go to the Grammar School and ended up doing the rest of my secondary education there.

Am I right that there was somebody we know that went to school with you at Ilfracombe - Bobbi Baxter?

Yes, that's right, John Baxter's wife, we were there in school together - I wondered what else you were going to say then! (Laughter)

Did you play rugby there? I was told that you were also a good cross-country runner.

Yes, I played a lot of rugby including county schoolboy rugby. Rodney Beer was my sports teacher and a real rugby enthusiast, who played for Barnstaple RFC and the county. I played for the Devon Schools' Under XV's, and later on played for Devon Public and Grammar Schools', where there was another Baxter connection because my first game for Devon Public and Grammar schools was against Devon Colts and who should be playing in the second row but W J Baxter (John). I was a decent runner at school. I ran for Devon in the South West Counties at 800 metres and at cross country at the National championships on a number of occasions, so sport really dominated my life. At seventeen I played rugby for Ilfracombe Rugby Club and had my first association with Exeter Rugby Club, playing against their "B"XV back in 1962. The "B"XV in those days was the 3rd team! The captain of the Exeter team was Frank Holding, a local school teacher at Stoke Hill Primary School who went on to be a peripatetic head teacher. After the match Frank asked me what I was going to do and I told him that I would be going to St Luke's College in September, so he suggested I join Exeter. After my first year at St Luke's when I lived at Killerton House my father was moved back to Exeter, so we settled in St Thomas and, being a stone's throw from the County Ground, I duly did what Frank had suggested and joined Exeter. For three years I played most of my rugby for St Luke's, but occasionally during the vacation I would play a few matches for Exeter with the "A"XV, (the 2nd XV) playing full-back. Interestingly during my 2nd year at St Luke's, I had a call one Monday evening asking me to play for Exeter Chiefs away against Bristol because Martin Underwood had dropped out of the team. Martin, an England winger who had played for Northampton, had come down to Exeter the previous year to lecture at St Luke's and he was my personal tutor at St Luke's. I duly played for

Exeter on a wet Wednesday evening under lights at Bristol, and we lost 19-16. I remember the Bristol XV included three England players –John Thorne, hooker, Roger Hosen, full-back and Richard Sharp. Richard Sharp the fly half played for England with our President, Dick Manley, who won all his caps in 1963. Interestingly, I actually played in the centre that night as the regular Exeter full- back was Derek Atkins and the captain was Barry Carless, who played fly-half - it was a really good occasion, I remember it as if it was yesterday.

How did you meet John Lockyer, our Supporters' Club Chairman?

I first met John when Exeter played against Teignmouth in the late 60s. John joined Exeter soon afterwards and we played rugby and cricket together for the Rugby Club for many seasons!! This included a floodlit cricket match on the old County Ground between the Rugby Club and Somerset County Cricket Club who included the very famous West Indian batsman, Viv Richards.

My first four years in teaching were in Dorset but as I wanted to continue playing rugby for Exeter I used to travel back down the old A35 twice a week Tuesdays and Thursdays for training. One evening in 1970 I had a call from Jack Harrison an ex-captain and member of the rugby club and Deputy Head at Hele's School. He asked if I fancied a job teaching at Hele's - it wouldn't happen these days would it?! Of course, I bit his hand off, went over and had a chat with the Head Teacher, Sam Medlar, who asked me if I would like to start in September! "Yes please Sir", I said! So In September 1970 I moved back to Exeter to teach PE. During my first year I coached a very strong 1st XV alongside Jack Harrison. The team had John Scott who played for Exeter, Rosslyn Park and Cardiff in the 70/80s, and went on to be capped many times for England. Also in that team were Chris Milford, (brother of Graham the Exeter scrum half in the 70s and Andy Worth, who of course is integral to the present Chiefs team ,driving all over the UK and Europe in the minibus with the team kit. I taught a good number of boys who played rugby for the Chiefs including current Directors, Steve Byrne and Keiron Northcott as well as a current trustee, Ian Pugsley.

(John and Bob later became selectors for the Devon team.)

Is it right that you were in the team for the SW Counties v All Blacks in 1973?

Yes, I played many times for Devon. I'm not somebody who keeps records, though my father kept some scrap books. I played for Devon and Cornwall against the All Blacks in January 1973, at Redruth and we lost 30 – 7, with about 15,000 people watching the game. There were six other Exeter players in the Counties side – John Lockyer, Paul and John Baxter, John Scott, Andy Cole and Andy Hollins. I also played for Devon and Cornwall on two other occasions, once in Romania. The Rugby Union at that time were trying to foster links with Eastern Europe and Devon and Cornwall were chosen to go out to Romania and play. This was in the early days of rugby in Romania. Ceausescu was their President - we went to a reception with him! Romania then came back to Devon and Cornwall and I skippered our side against them at Devonport Services and for Devon at Torquay.

In the 1970-71 season I was selected for the first England trial up at Wilmslow RFC. It was in the era of Duckham, Spencer, Fran Cotton and John Pullin and I perhaps played my most disappointing game ever. In those days you had a one-off opportunity so I was very disappointed. Even so I did receive a 'reserve card' for the England v Wales match though I guess I had gone down the pecking order somewhat!!

Can I mention one more game, which was a notable occasion in my career? It was 1975, and there were Rugby Union Centenary celebration matches in the four England regions. I was picked at full-back in the President's South and South West XV and played against the President's Overseas World XV at the Memorial Stadium, Bristol. Alan Pearn, an Okehampton boy was the only other Devon player in the SW team, though he played all his rugby at Bristol. In the World XV were some of the great All Black players of the 70s including Brian Lochore, Ian Kirkpatrick, Sid Going, as well as the great Colin Meads, so that was a wonderful experience to play in such a match in a fully packed Memorial Stadium.

When you moved back here, how much training were you doing?

As I mentioned earlier, we trained twice a week, every Tuesday and Thursday from 6.30pm to 8.30pm. We had good numbers and were a very good team in the '70s. My first coach at Exeter was Barry Carless, who was Captain and fly-half, and taught at Bramdean School - he still comes to Sandy Park. Although still playing I became involved in coaching because in those days the Captain was responsible for the training and coaching although the committee, in the early days, chose the team. The Captain would go into the committee room with his team selection, there would be some debate, but in fact, if my memory is right, the team very rarely changed. However it was a committee decision, they authorised it.

How many years were you Captain?

Only one year, 1974-5. Not many captained in those days for more than a season. Andy Cole, who is one of my very best friends, was captain for four years but that was unusual. The duties were very onerous in those days, you really did do everything including coaching the side. There was a team secretary who would pick up the phone but that was about all. In fact in my very early days with the club, postcards were sent to tell you when, where and in which team you were playing. Now people say "Why are we called the Exeter Chiefs?" It's because on those selection cards was 'Chiefs XV' - not '1st XV'! So, when the rugby club was re-branded that's where "Chiefs" came from! In the 90s Andrew Maunder was Captain for 6 or 7 years and then of course Rob came on and captained for 10 years wasn't it?

In the 70s The John Player Cup was the "red ribbon" competition and we played in it for most of those years. We had to qualify, however, through a Merit Table and we were part of the South West Merit Table along with the big three, Bath, Bristol and Gloucester. From Devon there were Plymouth and Exeter; Cornwall's representative came from their cup winner. In those days it was usually Penryn or St Ives. So the six teams played home and away to each other in the South West Merit table with the top four teams each year qualifying for the John Player Cup. We played a good number of the top clubs in the John Player Cup

competition in the 70s reaching the ¼ finals one year against Rosslyn Park when we lost with not long to go by 7pts to 6 when Park kicked a penalty goal as a result of a scrummage infringement – nothing changes!!

When did you finish playing rugby?

My final season was 1980 – 81 after having played 1st team rugby for 16 years. I didn't play in the lower teams when I decided to finish but I did play in the annual "golden oldies" match for some years, which became very competitive! I decided I needed a rest as I had been coaching the side as well as playing for a long time!! I joined the committee but I didn't have any official responsibilities though I was a Director of the County Ground Athletic Company and a Trustee at this time. As I mentioned earlier, although we were a very good side in the '70s, we didn't work well at recruitment. We relied on our name and success at this time, hoping that players would join us from local clubs but gradually fewer and fewer came. The mid-80s were tough times as our fixture list had become very strong by the early '80s but gradually the 1st XV had become much weaker!

During the '84 – '86 seasons we really struggled as a club. However, I think it was the season '87-88', when I approached three other guys who had all been mainstay members of the 1st XV in the 70s - John Snell, who was No. 8, Chris Mills who was our loose-head prop, and Phil Holman, who was fly-half, to form a coaching team. We managed, with luck as much as anything else, to turn the fortunes of the club around. This was due in no small measure to Nick Bodnar who had joined from Paignton RFC and was captain with Pete Drewett as vice-captain together with an influx of very good young players - Andy Maunder, Andy Green, Richard Gibbins, Paddy Chenery and Harry Langley to complement some older guys - Graham Bess, Mike Cathery, Geoff Tutchings, George Vowden, Trevor Harris and Steve Byrne. Gradually we had more and more success, with the younger players forming the basis of the 1st XV for some time thereafter.

I heard you were a very good cricketer? I believe you played in a Gillette cup match?

Yes, that was in 1969 for Devon CCC against Hertfordshire – and I scored 1 run!! I was captain of Exeter Cricket Club for several years during the mid-'70s, a very busy sporting period for me. In those days cricket and rugby were more compatible because the closed season was literally a closed season - when rugby stopped. I played cricket right the way through till September as rugby training in those days did not start fully until mid-August.

What about refereeing; I believe there was a certain game in the 3rd Division that you officiated?

Yes, that's right, in 1983 when I was helping with coaching. We were playing Headingley at the County Ground and the referee didn't turn up! I had refereed a lot as a school-teacher so I was volunteered to ref the game! I talked to both captains, (Peter Winterbottom was Headingley's captain) and said "if you all behave yourselves I'll do my best"!! It went ok

and we got through the game but I never found out what happened to the referee who was coming from Cornwall!

(Bob was Head Coach from '87 – '92 and then Director of Rugby from '92- '97.)

I became Director of Rugby because we had been coaching hard for five years and I felt it was time to step back and importantly, bring new coaches into the club. I first approached a Brixham coach called David Wiggins, who came up and coached the 1st XV and from then on we had a series of coaches which was important for the club's development. Those 5 years that I was Director of Rugby gave me as much enjoyment as when I was playing because the team at that time had become a very good team during the Maunder and Green era. Then Robert Baxter started playing and in my final season as Director of Rugby '96/'97 we had two successive promotions, leaving the club in good hands as we entered the professional era. We were then in the top 24 teams in the country.

Going onto your role as a Trustee, I'm sure a lot of people who are not Members won't know that there are Trustees and what they do? Can you explain your role?

I am very privileged to be one of the four Trustees at the Club. Paul Derbyshire, John Lockyer and Ian Pugsley are the others. A key date in the history of our club was 1925. Just after the 1st World War the ground was nearly sold but a group of players and members, amongst them some pretty astute businessmen at that time, bought the land that we knew as the County Ground, and placed that land in trust - this was an amazing bit of vision for 1925. The ground has remained in Trust, owned by the Members ever since and this of course allowed us to sell the County Ground, purchase Sandy Park and transfer the Trust Deed. The Trust document has not changed much over the years and the powers of the Trustees are very limited. Basically the Trust Deed states that Trustees are appointed to serve the wishes of the Membership. Currently we have about 750 Members. At the Annual General Meeting of the Rugby Club the members vote on the various motions of the meeting and the Trustees represent the Members to vote on their behalf at the Annual Group Meeting of the Board which immediately follows the Club AGM. The only other task is to keep the Share Certificate which is securely held by one of the Trustees on behalf of the Membership. At the moment there are about 2800 shares. Apart from these two functions there are no other specific tasks though the Board invite the trustees to occasional Board meetings to share information.

If a Member has a question, do you bring it to the Board?

Well, unofficially, we as Trustees like to feel we are to some extent the eyes and ears of the club. Between us we know a good number of Members and we talk to them as much as possible, especially on match days. We do hear occasional comments and concerns from Members from time to time and sometimes represent those views at Board meetings, to which we get invited about three times a year. We are always invited to a day in August when the club holds a forward-planning meeting concerning longer term planning issues. The four

of us are very grateful to the Board for inviting us to these meetings. We see our relationship with the Board as being “critical friends” – perhaps like governors are with schools. We ask questions on behalf of the Membership but we also like to be informed as much as is possible, within the confidentiality clauses, of what is going on. We think that we have a good working relationship with the Board. Of course the Membership is in overall control because the Members have the power to vote on all issues at the AGMs. The Board have done, and continue to do, a splendid job leading the Club forward and we all feel this is a comfortable and sensible working arrangement which we must all aspire to maintain for the next 100 years. Interestingly, from my association with the club in the early days most trustees have been ex-players and there have been very few in forty odd years. Apart from the present bunch only Jack Harrison, Tony Lee, Andy Cole, John Gibson and Dick Manley have been Trustees since the mid-70s so this gives a good measure of stability and continuity within the Club.