

## 94<sup>th</sup> Year 1965-6

“Exeter at their best looked fit to beat anybody, but lost too many matches they could have won”. This might seem to be a somewhat harsh criticism of the club’s performance by the Playfair Rugby Football Annual. Of 39 games played as many as 27 were won and one (the last game of the season) was drawn. Of the eleven games lost perhaps three or maybe four might have been won. Points scored totalled 533 whilst 321 were conceded.

Barrie Carless stood down as captain and his place was taken by scrum-half Keith Anthony (Tony) Hopper, a Yorkshireman whose career saw him become Financial Director to the E.B.C. Group Ltd. Martin Underwood took charge of training.

The new season did not start too well. On the opening day of the season Bideford, at home, held Exeter to a difference of three points (6-3) and this was followed by two heavy defeats. For the first time Exeter travelled to Moseley to play its first major game of the campaign. After a minute’s play the home team was five points ahead. Exeter did manage to reduce the lead by means of an Atkins penalty but that was to be the team’s only score in the game. Both sides played open rugby but it was only the home team that benefitted (3-35). Four days later with a rearranged team, Exeter went to Beacon Park where Plymouth Albion ran out winners by ten points (11-21).

On the third Saturday of September, Exeter played at home for the first time, facing Esher on the Surrey club’s tradition early season tour. Exeter did register a win but it was by only a single point (11-10). A mid-week defeat at Torquay Athletic did not augur too well for the fixtures that were to come (5-14).

At this point Exeter redressed the balance somewhat with four straight victories. The first came at the County Ground against Glamorgan Wanderers (18-3) and the other three came against Devon opponents – at home versus Newton Abbot (9-6), away at Devonport Services by the same score (9-6), then back home against Paignton (22-6). The next game, in Cornwall, against Penzance & Newlyn could have been one of the games Exeter might have won instead of going down by a single penalty goal (0-3). The up and down nature of results so far continued with victory at home against Saracens by another three point margin (6-3) before bogey team Weston super Mare came to Exeter and won by two points (9-11).

Two larger winning margins followed - at home against Clifton (17-6) and away at Taunton (19-9) before Exmouth inflicted a shock defeat on a full strength Exeter at the Imperial Ground (0-17). Exmouth had not won this fixture since December 1957 and had not registered such a wide margin of victory since February 1923. This unexpected defeat appears to have presented the team with not so much a set-back as an incentive to do better. Exeter went through the next eight games undefeated.

Redruth came to Exeter and instead of the usual dour forward battle both teams produced “the best and most refreshing rugby seen at the County ground for some time”. Exeter contributed most of the open play and scored all their points in the first quarter of the match. Exeter selected stand-in full back Bob White, who landed three penalty goals, and two forwards making their debuts – former Harlequins hooker John Bazalgette, and second-row Peter Woodhead who turned up ten minutes late (12-6).

In the run up to Christmas three local teams were vanquished – Teignmouth away (33-14), Torquay Athletic at home (9-3) and Barnstaple away (6-3). In the game at Teignmouth a 16-year-old John Lockyer made his debut for the home team. Boxing Day saw the return fixture with Exmouth at the Imperial Ground but there was to be no repeat of the November score line, Exeter winning this time by some distance (27-5). Remaining at home, Exeter defeated Taunton on New Year’s Day (8-3) and Streatham-Croydon the following week despite being reduced to thirteen men on the field through injury (16-12). The weather then caused an interruption for two weeks before a game with St. Luke’s

College at the end of January ended in the club's favour with Tony Vinnicombe scoring three tries (23-5).

February began with a visit from Bristol and although defeated Exeter put up a good fight (0-9). The next week found Exeter at Weston super Mare seeking revenge for the home defeat by the seaside town in October. This the team did in surprising style in wintry conditions. Far from the usual close struggle between the teams, Exeter completely outmanoeuvred a youthful Weston side to run in seven tries, three of them by D. Bain on the wing making his debut (33-0). In contrast, playing host to Barnstaple on a quagmire of a pitch, Exeter produced a drab performance only highlighted by two tries from Carless and one from John Radford (13-0). A mid-week floodlit game at Bridgwater & Albion brought another success (13-9) but disappointment followed at Beacon Park when Plymouth Albion defeated Exeter for the second time in the season. Exeter had what appeared to be a fair try by Carless controversially disallowed by the referee (8-12). Devonport Services at the County Ground proved to be an easily won encounter (36-6) but St. Luke's College then exacted revenge with a close win over the city side (3-8).

A visit to Wales to meet Bridgend produced what the local press described as a gallant performance at Brewery Field. The hosts included four internationals whilst Exeter had to play over half the game with only fourteen men after Carless, who had scored a try following an interception on half-way, had to leave the field injured. The score was all square at half time and it was only near the end of the game that Bridgend took advantage of the imbalance (11-24). A close home encounter with Cheltenham ended in Exeter's favour. This was described as an "unsatisfactory game" as Exeter should have scored more points (8-6). Away at Esher on the first Saturday in April, Exeter went under by three points, despite a rare dropped goal by No.8 Terry Hempton (9-12). This was to be the senior team's last defeat of the season.

Easter began with the customary game with Old Cranleighans (27-0). After the bruising received at The Reddings in September, Exeter might have been forgiven for keeping the Easter Monday meeting with Moseley to a tight, forward affair, but both teams were intent on playing open rugby. Exeter opened the scoring with a try by Terry Hempton but the visitors then countered with a try of their own that was converted. In the second half Exeter scored two more tries, one by Loughborough College student Roy Sleigh who deserted his wing position to take a pass mid-field to touch down by "avoiding one defender with a side step and dazzling the others with sheer speed". The visitors responded with a late try of their own (13-10).

Tuesday's meeting with Leicester was spoilt by a rain sodden pitch but even so Exeter went on "to surprise the pundits by winning all three of their Easter fixtures". This was Leicester's second defeat in a row at Exeter. Although play was not as open as on the previous day, the Exeter half-backs, Carless and Hopper, were more talented than their opponents and opened up play when possible. Roy Sleigh scored another try and Barrie Carless dropped a goal (6-0).

The playing surface was still muddy and the ball greasy when Bath visited Exeter. A dreary first half contained a succession of line-outs. In the second period Exeter showed a greater spirit of adventure and tried to throw the ball about. The revised policy paid dividends with five tries, four of which were scored by the backs (19-0). Exeter then travelled to London to meet Old Blues and now being on top of their game, came out winners (27-14).

For the final match of the season Exeter went to Kingsholm to face Gloucester in a mini heat-wave. According to a later Gloucester match programme "the two sides gave a brilliant display of rucker that matched the weather and the result, most fittingly, was a draw, ... Gloucester equalising in the closing minutes after many fluctuations of fortune". After a quarter of an hour the home side went thirteen points ahead. Exeter pegged away and went into a three point lead with five minutes to play when a

Gloucester penalty equalised the score. Dick Manley, who played a fine game, appeared for Exeter two years after announcing his retirement (18-18).