

54th Year 1925-6

At the end of this season any follower of rugby football in Exeter would surely have been left with mixed feelings. On the one hand the Annual Report declared that the playing record was “the poorest for many seasons”. On the other the club was re-establishing itself as a force in the regional game. The rugby club was now in control of the County Ground and with the opening of the new stand “Exeter is fast becoming the Twickenham of the three most western counties for rugby”. At least that was the view of the local press.

Captain for the season was D.C. Hoare, popularly known as “Colin”. Having been born in 1898 he must have been of a very tender age when he made his first team debut in November 1913. Reappearing after the war he received a knee injury in December 1919 that kept him out of the game for the whole of the following season. Prior to being elected captain he had served for three seasons as vice-captain.

Colin Hoare played well over 150 games for the club and was a frequent try scorer. He played mostly as a centre three-quarter but would fill in as a winger, stand-off or even scrum half when occasion demanded. After his season as captain he continued to appear in the senior team from time to time.

The season started in a most promising fashion with three consecutive victories and four wins out of the first five fixtures. Unfortunately only five more victories were registered during the remainder of the season.

Enduring incessant rain at Taunton, an understrength Exeter team delighted their followers with an unexpected success (11-3). At home, after the Mayor of Exeter opened the still incomplete new grandstand, Paignton was defeated (11-8). The hat-trick was completed when visitors Redruth were vanquished (8-0).

Long away trips had often proved difficult for Exeter and the next game at Camborne proved no exception. Travelling with a weak team the visiting forwards were unable to gain possession from both loose and set scrums and they also “failed to last the pace” (3-19). Given Exeter’s three match unbeaten run, 2,000 spectators turned up to watch the game.

A better forward performance followed at home against Barnstaple and an encouragingly large crowd would have been pleased with the performance (11-3).

Of the next eight matches Exeter managed only a single draw to set against seven defeats. Wellington came to the County Ground unbeaten and left with their record intact though Billy Braddon proved to be the outstanding player on the field scoring two tries (6-8). Another narrow home defeat by Torquay Athletic followed in a poor game spoilt by the referee – “the officiating was not at all that could be required” – leading to rough play and “ragged scrums” (5-6).

After a blank Saturday when Devon met Somerset at the County Ground using 650 of the projected 850 seats in the new stand, Exeter encountered a setback that afflicted the club for the rest of the season. It took the form of an outbreak of boils. Forwards were to suffer the most and at one point it was reported that only two second team forwards escaped entirely.

In these circumstances Exeter did well to travel to Devonport Services with a pack that included six reserves and to lose by only nine points (15-24). The “other” Services team played Wellington on this date. At Queens Park the team then lost to Paignton (3-6).

A brief respite came in the form of a drawn game with visiting Blaenavon in a “thrilling contest” when Exeter played “one of their best games of the season. The Western Mail took a different stance. “Exeter had to thank their forwards for escaping defeat” (6-6).

With a depleted side Exeter were not expected to win at Beacon Park against Plymouth Albion but they did extend their opponents. “Exeter played a delightful game and showed splendid sportsmanship” (9-20).

Entering a run of four home games Exeter continued their losing streak. Still with a depleted team Exeter led Newton Abbot by eight points at half-time but the defence cracked and the visitors ran out winners by a point (11-12). Against Exmouth only three regular forwards were able to take the field. A disappointing contest in which “both sides should have done much better” led to another narrow defeat (0-3).

Fortune smiled on the County Ground regulars over the next two weeks. Despite the absence of T.R.K. Jones, playing in an England trial), Billy Braddon and Henry Rew (both playing for Devon) and then finishing the game with only thirteen players due to injury, Exeter managed to hold out for victory against Bridgwater & Albion (8-3). Then came a draw with Weston (3-3).

Christmas fayre comprised back-to-back matches against Newton Abbot. Away Exeter was considered as being “not quite up to the level of the “All Whites.”” But the score line was not a fair reflection of the play (6-26). Two days later at the County Ground on a heavy pitch the margin was a lot closer in a game mainly confined to the forwards (0-8). Exeter might have done better had not Frank Buckland been forced to retire in the second half with a shoulder injury.

The first match of the New Year took place at Exmouth where the Cranford pitch was “scarcely in a fit state”. In the conditions it took some sympathetic refereeing to see the game through to a conclusion (0-3). At Barnstaple the meeting with the local club was heralded once more as “The Match of the Season”. With three late changes to their team Exeter fought a keenly contested game holding out for a draw in front of a large crowd (3-3).

Frost then took a hand causing cancellation of two fixtures. The first was against Sidmouth and the second a Monday home game against Neath who had called off their tour to Devon. This decision dealt a serious blow to Exeter’s finances.

Exeter embarked on another losing streak of six matches. At Plainmoor Torquay Athletic won although Exeter were well led by T.R.K. Jones, the current Devon captain, and D.P. Wilcocks scored the try of the game by picking up the ball in his own 25, sprinting away and punting over the full-back to regather and score. Jones was injured in this game and was absent for the visit of Plymouth Albion to a sodden County Ground where the ball was almost impossible to handle. For some reason the Exeter selectors had shuffled the team around with Colin Hoare playing out of position at scrum-half whilst Alf Woodrow was moved to play outside him (0-3).

At Newton Abbot Exeter were said to have been lucky to escape defeat so lightly but “their sportiness and avoidance of spoiling tactics was warmly commended by the spectators” (0-12).

Back at home against Taunton Exeter continuously attacked but to no avail whilst the visitors took their chances. Tactics were again questioned when Frank Buckland was temporarily off the field and was replaced by V.G. Troulan, one of the pack. When Buckland returned Troulan remained as an extra three-quarter (3-9).

A trip to Bridgwater & Albion resulted in the heaviest defeat of the season Exeter conceding six tries in the process (3-29). Billy Braddon ran three-quarters of the length of the field to register his side’s consolation try. Finally in this sequence Exeter went down at home to Wellington (9-17).

A run of seven matches that included only two defeats represented Exeter’s best spell of the season. A draw at home with Devonport Services began the mini revival (6-6). In contrast to previous seasons the Services fielded only one senior team as the Navy was playing the Army at Twickenham. It was Exeter who fielded two “senior” teams. Due to what was described as “fixture congestion” an “A” XV was sent to fulfil a date with Weston super Mare. The team suffered a heavy defeat (0-39).

The highlight of the season came when Neath returned to fulfil their engagement. There was “not a dull moment in 70 minutes” during the game which was the “best and cleanest all season”. “The form of Exeter has varied to such an extent that one feels they would have done much better this season had definite tactics been adopted rather than players endeavouring to do too much individually”. The Exeter team effort surprised Neath (8-6).

Another victory followed this time at Sidmouth where the kick-off was undertaken by the Minister of Transport (11-9). After scoring eight of Exeter’s points Billy Braddon had the misfortune to break his leg just above the ankle. Dr. H.L.G. Hughes conveyed him back to the R.D. & E. Hospital in his car and after treatment returned the club’s leading try scorer to his home at Ide.

Wednesday 24th March saw the official opening of the now completed grandstand. The ceremony took place at 5 p.m. when Mayor of Exeter Mr. Willie Brock, a former player (and father of the current player also named Willie Brock), hoisted the Exeter flag to fly over the new structure.

Devonport Services had agreed to send a team for an evening match to help celebrate the occasion. “Notwithstanding the rather poor playing record of the Citizens this season the advance along the path of progress of one of the best sporting organisations in the county is assured”. Nevertheless Exeter lost a game “crowded with incident” (0-13). The game was refereed by Eng.-Com. S.F. Cooper, Hon. Secretary of the Rugby Football Union. Perhaps it was due to his influence that play was marked by a “complete absence of free kicks”.

After the proceedings both teams, together and with many officials and local dignitaries, sat down to dinner at the Royal Clarence Hotel.

Three days after the festivities Exeter travelled to Blaenavon where the club could only register two Willie Brock (Jun.) penalty goals to set against their opponents total (6-17).

Easter witnessed a brief revival. Notts County returned to the County Ground but at the start Exeter had mustered only thirteen players to face them. Two substitutes were enlisted (both of first team quality) and they helped effect a draw (6-6). Easter Monday found Exeter facing new opponents in the form of Leytonstone. Fielding eight reserves the home team gained victory through its “unusually active pack of forwards” (14-8).

The third Easter fixture did not go so well when Moseley ran out winners in a game that “was not of a high standard due to staleness” (5-9). Three more defeats ended the season’s campaign.

At the County Ground Camborne duly achieved a double over their hosts (3-18). Then Redruth avenged an earlier defeat by winning easily in Cornwall (0-19).

Finally came another match at Barnstaple. The playing season had been especially extended to allow this game against the Devon Senior Cup winners on their own patch. As in the previous season both teams linked arms before kick-off to sing “Auld Lang Syne”. The home team prevailed (0-14).

The Annual General Meeting reporting on the poor playing record said that this was due in part to the irregular availability of several leading players and to the outbreak of boils that persisted all season. Officially the senior team record stood at 9 wins and five drawn games out of a total of 35 games played though press reports of only 8 victories have come to light. The Reserves won 13 and drew one game out of 28 played whilst the third XV was beaten only three times whilst 13 were matches were won and one drawn.

Whilst the new grandstand was a boon to both club and county the fact that revenue was not enough to meet expenditure and the club had a loan of £4,000 (£120,000) to clear. The fact that the Easter games were financially unsuccessful did not help.