

## 97<sup>th</sup> Year 1968-9

In the continuing effort to make rugby union football more attractive to the wider public, the International Board introduced as an experiment, at all levels of the game, the law that forbade direct kicking to touch outside one's own 25 yard line. This first change did not quite work as well as expected as players could still run back into the 25 before kicking to touch. On a more local level, this season also saw the reintroduction of the Devon Senior Cup competition to add even more spice to local games.

Exeter played a total of 38 matches of which 24 were won and the remainder lost, a not dissimilar proportion to the previous few seasons. Keith Hopper had played his last game for the club during the last campaign and A.R. (Andy) Cole was elected to take his place. A product of Blundell's School, he made his first senior appearance for the club in the last month of the 1961-2 when he was selected as a prop forward. He progressed to Cambridge University for whom he made a number of appearances and could be considered somewhat unlucky not to have been awarded a Blue in 1963. On his return to club rugby he appeared as a very effective back row player.

September did not see the usual flurry of early season games. The kick-off came with a home game with Teignmouth on the 5<sup>th</sup> September and even this game had been brought forward as the original planned fixture for the 23<sup>rd</sup> November now clashed with a County match at Exeter. With a young team, including a half back pairing of Mike Fisher and Bob Greenham who had formed a school partnership at Hele's, Exeter gained a routine victory (20-3).

On the 14<sup>th</sup> it was thought Esher would provide much sterner opposition as the tourists had already won two games amassing 95 points in the process. The game was one sided but it was Exeter, playing in white to avoid a colour clash, who ran away with the game, scoring nine tries, all but one by the backs. "Exeter Run Riot" headed one local report. Left wing Graham Angell touched down three times in the game and he was soon to receive invitations to play from both Devon and Cornwall (45-0).

After another predictable victory away at Newton Abbot (23-6), the first defeat of the season, albeit a narrow one, came at Glamorgan Wanderers on the last Saturday in September (14-17). The next home game against Devonport Services did not start too well with the three-quarters "falling down with their passing and over-kicking". Nearly an hour had passed when Martin Underwood, making his first appearance of the season due to injury, on receiving the ball, instead of going for the corner, cut inside three covering defenders and touched down under the posts. The conversion gave Exeter the lead for the first time and provided the spark for the home side to pile on the points (32-12).

At the County Ground, before the match against Redruth, players and officials stood in silence in memory of the great Cornish centre of the 1930-s, Roy Jennings. Said one report "It would be pleasant to record the game which followed was a fitting memorial, but unfortunately it was not." On a warm afternoon the Exeter backs were said to be sluggish whilst Redruth displayed spirit but lacked talent. "Had Exeter played the football of which they are capable this would have been a massacre" (14-6).

Exeter was unable to display anything like good form in two consecutive defeats away from home, against Saracens (3-24) and Clifton (13-15). Form did then revive with two home victories over Taunton (27-16) and Exmouth (29-6). The first clash of the season with St. Luke's College ended in another defeat in what Paul Huddart of the Express & Echo described as a "rough game". Exeter led by six points until eight minutes of the second half when wing forward David Hughes had to leave the field after receiving a head injury in making a last-ditch try saving tackle. Thereafter the College went ahead after Graham Angell, who had appeared in the Exeter XV two months before, scored a try (6-11).

After a blank Saturday due to a County match, Exeter resumed winning ways from the end of November until the first game of the New Year. The run started with defeats of Streatham-Croydon at the County Ground (19-5) and away at Torquay Athletic (16-11). A tussle with Barnstaple at this time did not present an easy prospect and so it turned out on a bone hard pitch on a frosty afternoon. The home side held Exeter as well as was expected but a simple defensive error allowed Mike Maynard an easy run in for a try that cost them the game (11-6). In the run up to Christmas, London Hospital came to Exeter and had the misfortune to lose a player with a leg injury after ten minutes. Lively hooker, Mike Cook by energetic backing up of play earned what were described as “two zip-along tries”. The handicapped visitors played spiritedly but were unable to respond (18-0).

The Boxing Day fixture at Exmouth ended in an easy win (26-6) but the weather caused the cancellation of a game at Plymouth Albion two days later. The New Year began with “a thriller” at Priory Park where Taunton made Exeter fight all the way for victory and thereby complete a double for the season over the team from Somerset. The lead changed hands four times before a try by Martin Underwood, five minutes from time, sealed the win (16-12). The next away game saw Exeter defeated at Cheltenham (8-23) before another cancelled fixture, a home game against Bridgwater & Albion.

“Dynamic” David Hughes crossed three times in a defeat of Cross Keys at the County Ground. The Welsh visitors went ahead at half time but the power of the Exeter pack was a telling factor and the game was won with ease (28-10). Victory over Paignton was even more emphatic, the team crossing for nine tries, of which wingers, Vinnicombe and Underwood, scored five (31-5). Enforced late changes did not disrupt the run of successes when the side defeated bogey team Weston super Mare at Weston. The Baxter brothers, Paul and John were stranded on Dartmoor which meant that captain Andy Cole reverted to his old University position of prop forward (12-6).

Played on a snow covered pitch that was swept by a biting wind, the home meeting with Barnstaple “was a truly Spartan encounter”. It took time for both teams to adjust to the conditions but it was the Barnstaple team that had to spend most time on the defensive. However it was not until the last ten minutes that Exeter scored two tries to secure the game (17-6). Travelling to London for a morning kick-off against Guy’s Hospital before attending the England-France International at Twickenham, Exeter had to field an understrength team and suffered the consequences. A Staddon penalty goal was all the team had to show for its efforts (3-14). Perhaps some consolation came from the fact that England won the afternoon game! Exeter returned home to face Plymouth Albion whom they defeated after a tight game (9-0).

The next home fixture against Devonport Services attracted more attention than might otherwise have been the case for a normal club encounter. The meeting was a second round tie in the newly re-instated Devon R.F.U. Senior Cup competition. The Services had defeated Okehampton in the first round whilst Exeter had been awarded a bye. As the game turned out Exeter coasted into the quarter-finals scoring eight tries, three of them by centre John Radford (37-12). Exeter’s last appearance in a cup match at senior level was in October 1922 when the team lost in the first round at Brixham by twenty points.

Four days after the cup success, Exeter travelled to Bristol to play a match under floodlights at the Memorial Ground. Although beaten, Exeter gave a good account of themselves (0-9). In the crowded end of season schedule Exeter then faced Bridgend three days later at the County Ground. Exeter deservedly won “a tough smouldering contest” played on “a strength sapping pitch resembling plasticine”. Bridgend, with four internationals, played a sluggish game and the team’s complacency turned to fury and frustration towards the end of the game. Exeter’s team spirit carried them through notably bolstered by eleven points from full-back Bob Staddon (14-0).

The interval for recovery was again only three days and the opposition for the next game was St. Luke’s College. The students had lost only three matches thus far in the season and Exeter could not

call on the services of five first choice selections. Whereas the early season game was close, Exeter was unable this time to match the efforts of their opponents (8-20). The next game followed in another four days, to add to the pressures on the team - it took place in Northern Ireland. Continuing the series of games with Belfast Royal Academy F.P., Exeter made the trip with a representative XV to squeeze a victory for the first time in this third meeting between the two sides. Trailing by two points into the second half, Bob Staddon clinched the win with a forty yard wind assisted penalty goal (9-8).

Cup rugby returned to the County Ground with a quarter-final contest between Exeter and Barnstaple. Exeter had already beaten the North Devon team twice in the season but the week previous to this game Barnstaple had defeated Plymouth Albion. Exeter would not have underestimated the opposition but, as is the way with knock-out competitions, the underdogs came out on top and Exeter's return to Cup rugby ended for this season. Although there was only a single point difference come the end of the game a later Exeter match programme acknowledged that Barnstaple were worthy winners (5-6).

On the Saturday before Easter Old Blues were despatched with ease (33-5) but a week later another old boys team, Old Cranleighans, provided stiffer opposition (11-8). After those victories, much to the disappointment of supporters, the season for Exeter ended poorly with only one more success in the remaining six outings

On Easter Monday Moseley inflicted the biggest defeat of the season to date on their hosts. The Exeter team was overwhelmed. Strangely, given the outcome, Exeter led by two penalty goals to a try at the interval. In the second period the visiting backs began to find the gaps, running freely through a shattered defence (6-32). The following Saturday Exeter went to Penzance & Newlyn and lost to a late score by the home side (9-11). Mid-week, at home to Bath, the margin of defeat was extended again (14-31).

A brief respite came after these poor displays with a home win over Abertillery. Exeter regained composure and put together a number of good handling moves while the visitors had to contend with losing a player to injury in the first half (18-6). The recovery did not last as a week later the Exeter team was back in Cornwall where Redruth inflicted defeat by the same score as on the visit to the Duchy a fortnight before (9-11). The season was extended by the R.F.U. to include the first Saturday in May. Exeter might have wished that it had not as a dismal game at Kingsholm saw Gloucester cross for eight tries and Exeter suffer its heaviest defeat of the season (5-37).