

## 109<sup>th</sup> Year 1980-1

“Satisfactory, if not quite as successful as one might have hoped, probably sums up the season from the playing point of view” was the typically understated summary presented in the Annual Report. The 1<sup>st</sup> XV played 44 matches of which 24 were won and three drawn with 717 points scored and 580 conceded. This record is very similar to that of the previous season. Tim Woodrow served his third and final year as captain. It was his “whole-heartedness” that made the season much more successful than some supporters were predicting after a poor start. His efforts paid off to such an extent that some thought the club should have done better. Tim could not win!

This season also saw the official inauguration of a modern floodlighting system at the County Ground. The need to defray costs meant more mid-week evening games that put more pressure on the club’s sometimes vulnerable squad system.

The season began badly with three defeats in the first three games. Coach Paul Baxter was typically forthright in a message to the players following a “diabolical performance” at Tiverton (7-10). He wrote (and probably said as much in more colourful language, to team, “You’ve heard it all before, but it has never been more relevant than now. YOU OWE!”

If the result against Tiverton was embarrassing then the result against Boroughmuir was more than disappointing. Exeter led for a time but let the team from Edinburgh, on a two match tour, back into the game (16-23). At Pontypridd the home team played a fifteen man game that was much appreciated by the large crowd. Exeter was reduced to playing a defensive role which the team was not able to master (4-42).

Back on home soil Exeter was then faced with its first Merit Table match of the season against Camborne. After three defeats in the first three games confidence may not have been high but sufficient motivation was found to gain a valuable win and heads could be held just a little higher having scored five tries to one (33-12). Another important competitive game followed. Because Exeter qualified for the John Player Cup as Devon Cup Holders and not by means of the Merit Table, entry was made at an early stage in the competition. The club had been drawn to play Matson away. The Gloucester Combination side boasted a proud home record and had achieved much success in local competitions. Hampered by late changes, especially in the front row, Exeter nevertheless won mainly through the strength of their scrummaging. It was a hard fought game and Exeter expressed much praise for Matson’s performance (14-8).

Three home games brought three satisfying victories starting with a comfortable win over Esher (28-0). Mid-week Devonport Services came to play under the floodlighting. An “A” XV game and the Devon v Zimbabwe match had already made use of the new system but this game marked the 1stXV’s debut under its own floodlights. Unfortunately the game was played in appalling conditions with rain sheeting down on occasions. It was hardly an auspicious occasion and an understrength Exeter team made hard work of defeating a relative weak Services side (20-6). On the day that Devon met Somerset at Bridgwater in the County Championship, Crediton came to the County Ground to play before a disappointingly small number of spectators. Skipped by full-back Phil Treseder in the absence of Woodrow, Exeter duly won (19-6).

In an unprecedented run of fixtures, Exeter went on to play the next three matches in the London area. The first took place at Southgate against Saracens who took the honours after Exeter had failed to convert a number of try scoring opportunities (3-17). For the next games, due to County calls and injuries, Exeter could field only three first choice players against Sidcup whom some regarded as a junior club (6-10). Defeat by Wasps at Repton Avenue was described as a “drubbing”. Again tries were lost through carelessness or choosing a wrong option (4-31). “Three dismal defeats” wrote a despondent Terry Davies.

Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> of November was the date set for a visit by Llanelli to officially inaugurate the new lighting system. Much to the club's disappointment the Welsh side was unable to fulfil its commitment. It was Torquay Athletic who kindly stepped into the breach to enable a game to take place. The game itself started, in the words of reporter Bill Fenwick, as "an ill-tempered first half that stumbled from penalty to penalty". During this period Torquay took the lead with three successful penalty attempts and missed with as many as seven others. Eventually Exeter managed to gain control before the interval with a Nick Bagge try. Play improved in the second half with some attractive running football. Exeter scored two further tries and Staddon, restored to the full-back position, dropped a neat goal (26-12).

On the day that Devon was facing Cornwall in a county game, Exeter invited Oxford to make a first appearance at the County Ground. A slightly under-strength home team was not fully extended (21-3). Then came another debacle when a reasonably strong XV lost at Weston super Mare (0-10). The defeat again raised doubts about the club's ability to compete at the highest level. The club's enigmatic form was demonstrated in the next game when "the result at Bath was a pleasant surprise". In rain and on a muddy Recreation Ground a Steve Webb's second-half penalty goal equalised the score. According to the Bath press "mud was a great leveller but Exeter came nearest to scoring" (3-3).

Friday November 28<sup>th</sup> was now the date for the official floodlight inauguration meeting with Llanelli. On this visit the Welsh team fulfilled a promise to send a stronger XV than had appeared at the County Ground the previous April. Within the first twenty-two minutes the visitors had scored twenty points but Exeter, playing in white, was prepared to throw the ball about as well and came into the game more in the second half. Llanelli scored six tries in all but the biggest cheer of the evening was reserved for hooker Bruce Priday who dived over near the end of the game for Exeter's only try. (12-28). Earlier in the month Exeter had the privilege of opening a new floodlighting system installed by Yeovil on their Johnson Park ground (56-0).

On the first Saturday of December Exeter was at The Rectory Field to play Blackheath in the John Player Cup competition. It turned out to be one of the great days in the club's history. Michael Green, author of "The Art of Coarse Rugby", opened his report for the Sunday Times with the following words. "When the Exeter touch-judge signalled his side's final and shattering penalty goal by jumping two feet in the air as he waved his flag, one could sympathise with his jubilation". The touch-judge was Richard Spiller and Steve Webb's fifth successful penalty kick meant victory for his team. Down by a point half-time, Exeter turned around to face the wind into which Webb, after two successful first half penalties, kicked three more goals. The home side did score two tries but as Green observed "Blackheath have only themselves and the Exeter forwards to blame" (15-11).

With no time to rest on its laurels the team had three day's rest before meeting Plymouth Albion in a home mid-week Merit Table match under lights. Albion enjoyed a lot of possession but it was Exeter who scored the points without playing really well (19-0). It was a depleted side that then travelled to Wales to meet Glamorgan Wanderers who were enjoying a good season. The make-shift Exeter team gave a good account of itself and led by six points into the second half when errors let the side down rather than being outplayed (6-18).

Exeter had to pay its first visit to Imber Court with a weakened team. Metropolitan Police ran out deserved winners and the London press according to Terry Davies "seemed to be dismissive of Exeter's efforts". For the second week running it was the errors that Exeter made that let them down (9-19). After the Christmas holiday Exeter played host to Torquay Athletic. Twice Exeter led by ten points and twice Torquay pulled back to within a point or two but towards the end Exeter scored sixteen more points without reply with winger Nick Bagge claiming three tries. Torquay Athletic had been experiencing a poor season and was suffering from a lack of adequate reserves (36-18).

A return fixture with Llanelli under lights at Stradey Park might have been seen as a daunting prospect but Exeter was undergoing a mini-revival and although the team lost by six tries to two, both press and public were impressed by the Devonians approach to the game. Indeed Exeter was credited with scoring the best two tries of the game, both of which were initiated by Bob Staddon from the full back position. For the first he came up into the three-quarter line to make the extra man in order to link up with winger Nigel Harris who set up centre Steve Donovan for the score. The second effort was even more impressive. Staddon had to turn towards his own line to field a Llanelli kick. Facing his own line, he gathered the ball under pressure in his own 25. He turned and, instead of a return kick, he made a break and ran 40 yards up field where he timed a beautiful pass to Steve Webb who made another 20 yards before sending the ball on to Simon Day who accelerated away to the try line. "This was the highlight of the match" reported the Sunday Independent. Unfortunately for Exeter defensive lapses gave away too many points again (13-28).

Three days later under lights on home soil Exeter was nearly brought down to earth by Barnstaple who took a twelve point lead in the first twenty minutes. Clawing their way back into the game with the help of a try from skipper Woodrow, Exeter managed to edge ahead. In a scoreless second-half, Barnstaple missed chances with penalty kicks (13-12). A blank Saturday might have followed when Maesteg was involved in a Welsh Cup match but a substitute fixture was made with Redruth. After an absence of over four years from the County Ground the visitors looked, at first, to be heading for a heavy defeat but Redruth effected something of a turn-around and at the beginning of the second half Exeter was trailing. The home forwards then took charge and two more tries were scored (22-13).

For the first Merit Table game in the second half of the season, Exeter faced Bristol under the County Ground lights on what was described as "a pig of a Friday night" when the pitch was drenched by rain. In the skipper's words "the effort was there but the skill wasn't" (0-15). Another competitive match followed eight days later when Exeter travelled to Bournemouth for the third away tie in this season's John Player Cup competition. The south-coast team caused Exeter some anxious moments and the lead changed hands five times. A try by the long-striding Bagge secured the game for his side (19-15).

A Merit Table match at Camborne produced an even closer result which could have gone either way but Exeter achieved a valuable win. It was in the final minute that flanker Simon Day crashed over for a try, the conversion of which won the game (16-15). Exeter then defeated another last gasps win against a Cornish club. At the County Ground ST. Ives led twice but this time the winning try came from Steve Lewis (26-22). A home meeting with Exmouth under lights in a mid-week game ended in a much more clear cut victory (49-6). At home to Newbridge Exeter, said by Terry Davies to be "overawed", lost for the first time in a month (22-29). At Birmingham the match incredibly ended all square after Exeter had found themselves eighteen points behind (21-21).

A scheduled meeting with Exeter University was cancelled to make way for the John Player Cup match against Moseley who had been dubbed favourites to win the competition. Moseley duly won but only after being made to work hard by "an energetic and vigorous home side". Exeter matched the visitors try for try but whereas Moseley took their chances from penalty goals Exeter did not "on a swampy gluey pitch". The visiting "hard and sometimes ill-tempered pack gradually wore down the lighter home forwards". In the eyes of The Times correspondent, Exeter's try came from "quite the best movement of the game" by "flipping the ball along the line at great speed and skill and for once eluding the iron grip of Moseley's tackling for Donovan to score" (7-15).

Hard on the heels of this cup match came another – a Devon Cup Quarter Final encounter with Plymouth Albion at Beacon Park. In very heavy conditions in a less than inspiring match Exeter edged home (7-3). A week's rest followed when Nottingham had to cry-off because of John Player Cup commitments. A rescheduled mid-week game with Exeter University was won (19-9) but then again there was no Saturday match after Maesteg cried-off. Activity restarted with another encounter

with Plymouth Albion in a Merit Table game, again at Beacon Park. The match itself, like the one three weeks previously, was hardly a good advertisement for Rugby Football. Exeter won again but this time it was Albion who scored the only try (9-6).

A much improved Cheltenham side came to the County Ground hopeful of a victory or even a draw to help in their bid to join the South West Merit Table. The visitors failed and Exeter achieved a convincing win (28-3). This effort proved to be good preparation for a Devon Cup Semi-Final against Tiverton, conquerors of Torquay Athletic at the quarter final stage, who enjoyed the advantage of playing at home. It would be no easy task for Exeter who had lost on two previous visits to the Coronation Ground. Exeter duly won but it said to have been "a muted victory" (23-6).

Another Merit Table match soon followed, this time at Bristol where Exeter's improving form nearly upset the home team. Exeter's efforts were all the more praiseworthy as skipper Woodrow was injured during the game (6-13). Just when Exeter looked to end the season on a high note, a mid-week clash at Taunton "seemed like something out of a nightmare" when the home side achieved a one point victory over a good strength visiting team (3-4).

The Easter programme began with a match against Bedford who came with a technically good pack that gained a lot of possession but Exeter showed more commitment and ran out victors (13-7). Monday saw Moseley in the city again for an Eastertide game for the first time since 1976. Exeter played well once more but the difference in the two side was down to two straightforward penalties in front of the posts landed by the visitors (11-17).

Two important games remained. The first of these was a Merit Table meeting with Gloucester at the County Ground. It was a bitterly cold Saturday and although it was nearly the last game of the season, Gloucester made no excuses and as a later Gloucester programme note conceded "on the day the better side won" (22-11). Victory meant that Exeter achieved its highest position in the South West Merit Table - second to Bristol. But the season was not to end on a happy note. On the last day in April the final of the Devon Cup was held at the County Ground with Exeter facing Exeter University. Before the game the University had expressed the desire for the game to take place at a neutral venue but the students need not have been concerned as Exeter contrived to lose a close fought game by a point (13-14).

Although Tim Woodrow gave up the captaincy he went on to play for one more season but the team that we to lose other seasoned players. John Lockyer decided to exchange his playing boots for a referee's whistle and both Bob Staddon and Clem Davies retired for a second time.

The "A" XV had another successful season under the captaincy of Steve Arnold winning 27 games, drawing two and losing just nine. The "B" XV managed 15 wins and two draws out of 32 games played. The Colts won only nine and drew two of 26 games played.