

110th Year 1981-2

At first sight the playing record of 23 victories and two draws in a programme of 46 games played would appear to be on a par with the records of the previous three seasons but the Annual Report showed that the committee was not satisfied by the performance of the senior XV as “this has been a season on which unfortunately we would not wish to dwell for too long”. The Report continued “Suffice to say that it is some time since points for were exceeded by points against”. The last time this had happened was in season 1957-8. By far the main disappointment from the playing point of view was the inability of the senior team to win a single match in the South West Merit Table – eight defeats in eight matches. A glimmer of hope came with victory in the Devon Cup Final.

Under the captaincy of flanker Simon Day the team had to undergo a rebuilding programme following the retirement of a number of senior players. When reviewing the prospects for the coming season, the captain recognised the need to increase the strength in depth of the squad whilst coach, Paul Baxter, declared “we do not have a big side but we are fit”.

An exciting game at the County Ground against Public School Wanderers kicked off the season. Although not at full strength, Exeter managed to just edge out the visitors whose ranks included two Welsh internationals (23-20). Two days later Exeter went down at Maesteg and although the margin of defeat was quite wide the team performed well in a very physical encounter (10-29). A week later Exeter, at home, faced Welsh opposition again and this time managed to hold Pontypridd to a draw (12-12).

The first competitive game soon followed – a Merit Table encounter with Camborne. In a gale with near horizontal rain Exeter disappointed against a much bigger opposing pack (10-16). A recovery of sorts was made in a mid-week match at Teignmouth but the victory was not convincing (24-9). More pleasing was the home victory over Glamorgan Wanderers, though the game might have slipped away in the second half had the visitors been better disciplined (13-6). A more comfortable home victory was achieved against Esher (24-0).

The improvement did not last. At home mid-week under lights Exeter went down to Plymouth Albion “in a rather inept display (3-6). This was Albion’s first win against their Devon rivals since March 1978. Exeter had now lost its first two Merit Table matches. Oddly The Times printed the result as 6-3 to Exeter. Four days later Exeter suffered another set-back. On a day when Devon was playing in the County Championship Tiverton came to the County Ground. Exeter unusually fielded a team that contained no players with either current or previous County experience. Tiverton again dented Exeter’s pride (12-13).

The prospect of the facing visiting Saracens would have been a daunting one - and it nearly turned out to be so. The London club gained so much possession in the first half hour that an avalanche of points seemed inevitable but like Glamorgan Wanderers three weeks previously, Saracens then adopted the wrong tactics. Wing Peter Broughton scored an opportunist try and Exeter went to gain a much needed fillip (12-3). To follow, on another County Championship day, Exeter faced another local side – Crediton. This time acting captain Steve Lewis guided his team to victory (10-3). Much more satisfying was a win under the home floodlights against Torquay Athletic (16-7).

The first away match for a month found Exeter tasting defeat at Cheltenham (6-12). Exeter’s weaknesses were then fully exposed by the strong visiting Wasps side (7-36). Another County day saw Exeter facing local opposition again when, at Cranford, Exmouth was defeated with ease (26-0). Back at home another unexpectedly large defeat came against St. Ives whose sole try came in injury time (4-19). A Merit Table defeat at home to Bath would have been less of a surprise. Despite the heavy going underfoot and a gale force wind the team gave a much improved performance, even with scrum-half Jon Mears having to play at full-back. Though Exeter did struggle for possession

exception was taken a one press comment that implied that Bath made hard work of defeating an inferior side (3-13).

A mid-week floodlit game with the Royal Navy at the County Ground ended in victory through the only score of the game (4-0). Two away defeats were to follow. On their own ground Tredegar came out on top (9-18) whilst at Beacon Park, Plymouth Albion won a Merit Table meeting (6-16). Then two games had to be cancelled because the County Ground had become unplayable.

On the Monday after Christmas play recommenced with a game against Torquay Athletic at the Recreation Ground. With Exeter leading, the game was abandoned after seventy minutes play because the pitch had been reduced to a quagmire. The result was counted as a much needed win for Exeter (7-3). The New Year began with a drawn home game with Walsall in the first ever meeting between the two clubs (13-13).

Not for the first time, the weather then intervened in Exeter's preparation for a forthcoming John Player Cup match. Successive away fixtures with Clifton and Bristol both had to be cancelled. To help Exeter achieve some playing time, Newton Abbot kindly agreed to play under the County Ground lights on the Tuesday before the scheduled cup game. The victory, during which Steve Donovan scored three tries, had a hollow ring to it but nevertheless the club was grateful to Newton Abbot for fielding a team for the second time in three days to help its neighbours (51-9).

The John Player Cup 3rd Round meeting with Thurrock was typical of many such games of this period. The junior club from Essex hired a train to bring some five hundred or so supporters to Exeter. Their vocal efforts often drowned out home club support. The visiting players rose to the occasion against a similar sized but more experienced home pack on a heavy pitch. Exeter, matched in early play, began to take charge after twenty minutes and show some real authority. From a tapped penalty near the Thurrock line, the Exeter forwards forced their way over and hooker Bruce Priday claimed the touch-down. Dominance continued in the second half but the only reward was a Steve Webb penalty goal. "There could be no argument that the better side won" wrote Geoff Harvey-Barnes in the Express & Echo (7-0). The proud Thurrock supporters might have mused about what might have happened on their own drier home pitch.

Three days later came a Devon Cup match at home against Barnstaple under lights on what was still a heavy pitch. There was not a lot of running rugby and although Exeter's victory was clear-cut it was not overwhelming (17-3). Visitors Maesteg presented a different proposition given that club's reputation for playing attractive rugby. The Welsh club, however, was disappointing and Exeter gave a good account of themselves. The game could have gone either way but as skipper Day said "they made fewer errors" (6-16). A mid-week meeting with an Exeter University team weakened by injuries also proved to be disappointing. In a game of no tries, Jon Mears, again appearing at full-back, dropped a goal and kicked six penalty goals to register all his team's points (21-9).

In place of Newbridge, who cried off, St. Ives came to the County Ground for a match with a morning kick-off on an International day. Exeter lost "in what passed for a game of rugby" as Terry Davies put it. The St. Ives try came in the last minute (3-4). More fixture rearrangement was necessary due to club cup commitments when, the following week, Bristol invited Exeter to play at the Memorial Ground in place of Cardiff. This game, in contrast to the previous week, drew the comment "quite a change" from Davies (3-21).

After the meeting with Bournemouth in the John Player Cup the previous season, Exeter invited the Hampshire based club to play a mid-week game under lights at the County Ground. Although not at full strength, Bournemouth came intent on upsetting the odds and managed to score the first try but the team was unable to maintain the effort and fell away allowing Exeter to win the game, much to their relief (18-6).

Over the following two weeks Exeter met two of the most powerful clubs in the country and for all the club's plucky performances the results were predictable. Firstly Swansea visited with a very strong side even though it was shorn of three international players. The margin of defeat was heavy (9-47). In the Fourth Round John Player Cup match Exeter faced one of the favourites for the title and, as recorded in *The Times*, "Gloucester emphasized their challenge by scoring seven tries in the demolition of Exeter at Kingsholm". Moreover Gloucester missed six penalty goal attempts. Exeter had no answer to the powerful home pack (3-34).

A mid-week game under the home floodlights against Taunton brought the first win in a month (18-3) but then, three days later Exeter lost a sixth Saturday game in succession when playing at Nottingham (0-8). A home mid-week fixture with Sidmouth was cancelled before Exeter University was met on a dry pitch at the County Ground in a Devon Cup Quarter Final match. Exeter just scraped through with Mears kicking a decisive penalty goal (10-9).

A week-end without a game did Exeter no favours as they went next to Camborne for a Merit Table game, Exeter did manage to score two tries but poor goal-kicking let them down whereas it was Camborne's kicking that sealed the visitor's fate. The result "even made loyal supporters wince" (10-21). A run of three successive victories probably then gave the Exeter faithful more heart. A spirited Bridgwater & Albion team went down under the County Ground lights (20-13) before the team achieved one of its better away results of the season against Glamorgan Wanderers despite back-row forward Graham Bess having to be carried off the field (19-7).

Even playing under the home floodlights Exeter would have faced Brixham in a Devon Cup semi-final match with trepidation. The appalling conditions and continual rain might have been seen to favour the under-dogs but Exeter held firm after the visitors started like the proverbial "bats out of hell". The score hardly represented total domination but the win "must have done the morale a tonic" (12-6).

Easter commenced with a trip to Bedford that ended in defeat (10-18) and concluded with a game on Tuesday against Liverpool making its first trip to Exeter. The visitors won (19-27). Gloucester once again figured on the fixture list, this time in a Merit Table game at Kingsholm. The game took place a week before Gloucester appeared in the John Player Cup Final at Twickenham against Moseley. A report in *The Times* concentrated on Gloucester's selection issues for the final but did concede "One should not of course, forget the presence of Exeter; they worked hard for their loose possession...." (7-21).

Two additional significant games followed quickly. At Torquay Athletic, Exeter dug deep into their reserves of energy to hold out for a vital win in the Devon Cup Final (9-4). This result ensured that the club could still claim a place in the following season's John Player Cup competition.

The season finally ended on May 1st with a home Merit Table match against Bristol. Exeter's sorry performance in this competition ended with another defeat making eight defeats in all eight games played (0-25).

The club's poor performance on the field of play was reflected by the "A" XV who, depleted at times by 1st XV calls, won only twelve and drew one out of 34 games. The "B" won fifteen and lost twelve games but had as many as ten cancelled due to bad weather. The Colts disappointed, winnings only seven and drawing one of 22 games played. In addition as many as thirteen games had to be cancelled.

At the end of the season Tim Woodrow had received a business promotion that took him to South Wales thus ending a notable career with Exeter.

During the course of the season back row forward Peter Winterbottom was first capped by England. He went on to gain 58 caps in all and made two Lions tours. He had played for Exeter whilst a student at Seale-Hayne College but did not finish his course there and left the district much to the regret of the Exeter playing squad and supporters. He was one of a dynamic back row trio, with Fred Hartley and Steve Hughes, that was lost to the club when career moves took them elsewhere.