

107th Year 1978-9

If the playing record for 1978-9 fails to impress in comparison with that of the previous season then it should be realised that there were mitigating circumstances. The first would have been the club's steadily strengthening fixture list and the increasing pressures imposed by competitive rugby. The second, and probably of greater significance, was the unprecedented number of injuries suffered by squad members. Many of these were incurred on the hard playing surfaces that persisted for the first ten weeks of the season. At one point 27 players were on the list of those injured and as many as 53 players appeared for the senior team during the season. The campaign produced a few low spots but there were certainly highlights too.

The final playing record read Played 42, Won 27, Drawn 1 and Lost 14 with 692 points scored and 423 conceded. The newly elected captain was second-row Tim Woodrow who had represented Dorset-Wilts. His career in the brewing industry had brought him to Exeter and he made his debut for the club at the commencement of the 1974-5 season. He played until the end of the 1981-2 when his next career move took him to South Wales where, much to his own surprise, he found himself playing first team rugby with Cardiff. Later he returned to Dorset as a Director of a brewery company. He died of cancer in January 2018.

For the first time the club met transatlantic opposition. The opening fixture was a mid-week encounter with Dallas from Texas, U.S.A. A week later it was the turn of Calgary Saints from Canada to appear at the County Ground. Dallas, playing the second game of their tour, found themselves confined to their own 22 metre area during the first half. The tourists asserted themselves more in the second half but could make little headway against a dominant Exeter pack. With so much possession Exeter scored seven tries but eased off towards the end of the game (38-4). Making his debut for Exeter in this match was Charles Kent, formerly of Rosslyn Park, who had been awarded four Blues at Oxford University and won five caps at centre for England. In this game he scored two tries but had to leave the field injured twenty minutes before the end. A native of Bridgwater and a former pupil of Blundell's School, Kent had taken a local medical appointment. He made several appearances for the club over two seasons but opportunities were limited by the demands of his profession and injury. He was to die suddenly in Devon in March 2005.

At home to Esher another high score was posted (44-7) before attention was turned to the Saints from Canada. An understrength team produced some exciting individual efforts and again rattled up a high score but it was a disjointed affair. In the view of Terry Davies, writer of the club programme notes, "perhaps the game is best forgotten" (42-0).

Playing host to Ebbw Vale four days later, Exeter, still with a number of first choice players missing, gave a disappointing display (10-16). The following Tuesday a home fixture against Torquay Athletic was postponed due to a clash with a county game. Inexplicably at least six national newspapers carried the result "Exeter 15 Torquay 10" although no game took place. When the fixture was played a fortnight later Exeter would have settled for the score line of the "ghost match"!

At the Recreation Ground against Bath, Exeter's performance was said to be spirited. A Steve Webb penalty opened the scoring. The "tigerishness after the loose ball" shown by the Exeter pack kept the home side at bay for much of the match but Bath was eventually able to apply the pressure that won the game (9-15).

Mid-week a team was sent to Crediton for the purposes of playing a centenary celebration match. Unfortunately, due to injuries and county calls on the same night, Exeter was unable to call on eleven first choice selections. An offer to play the game later in the season was declined by Crediton and so the side fielded was not of the standard that the fixture deserved. In an uninspiring game, Exeter was unable to score any tries and only just won by means of two Jon Mears penalties (6-3). The following Saturday Exeter again had to rely on goal kicks to defeat Camborne in a Merit Table encounter. The

game was described as a “drab affair”. In the eyes of Camborne, “Exeter were very fortunate to scrape home” (9-3).

Disappointment was the outcome of the re-arranged home game against Torquay Athletic. The Exeter team was not far short of a representative fifteen but defeat by the team from South Devon was still a bitter pill to swallow (15-22). Prospects for the immediate future did not look promising. Still faced with a long injury list, Exeter was to face five of the strongest teams on the fixture list in six weeks and of these games only one would be played at home.

“A much depleted Exeter side, with eight replacements, including a third team scrum-half, was soundly beaten at Bedford”. The Exeter forwards suffered at the hands of a mobile and lively home pack and flagged towards the end of the game. Exeter was further handicapped when winger Kit Harding had to leave the field after an hour to be replaced by back-row forward Graham Willis. On the positive side Bob Staddon played his usual calm game in adversity and Peter Full scored a try and kicked eight further points. A report suggests that Exeter “was lucky to lose by only 11 points” (12-23).

At Sidmouth a meeting with the local club brought some respite in a morning fixture before a Devon match at the County Ground (28-3). To follow another unfamiliar looking fifteen went to London to face Saracens. Although defeat was the outcome, this time the margin of defeat was narrow (6-12). In this game Exeter scrum-half Graham Milford was opposed by his brother Chris who was the Saracens scrum-half. Further weakened by county calls Exeter next met Birmingham at The Portway. The home side was said to have “put on a lacklustre display” but still managed to edge home. The score was level at the break before Exeter actually took the lead with a Harding try but near the end a converted try brought Birmingham victory (13-18).

At home for the first time in five weeks, Exeter had to accept defeat at the hands of visiting Wasps after a game that was closer than many expected (16-21). The next game was at Kingsholm on the day of a round in the County Championship. It had been suggested that Exeter players might have been tempted to withdraw from the county team as Devon could not progress in the competition and the club match was to count as a Merit Table meeting. In the event the Exeter contingent remained loyal to the county. Led by second-row Clem Davies, Exeter, with only three first team players in the side, ran the home team close with “B” team prop Steve Byrne scoring a try (7-13).

Given the trials and tribulations encountered so far Exeter would have been apprehensive in facing Devonport Services at the County Ground. The Services had not beaten Exeter since April 1967 but so far in this campaign the team from Devonport had won fourteen games and Exeter only six. The Exeter pack dominated the first half and at the interval the home side led by twenty-one points. Playing with the wind on the resumption of play the visitors registered sixteen points in as many minutes. A shaken Exeter side was rallied by skipper Woodrow and two more tries were added and a sequence of defeats was ended (33-16).

At home to Cheltenham another major injury was sustained to add to the already long list when prop Trevor Harris was stretchered off the field with twisted knee ligaments. A brilliant Milford try was added to another by Steve Williams. These scores and Peter Full’s successful kicking saw Exeter home (13-3). Away at St. Ives the Exeter fifteen showed eight changes from the team that was listed in the match programme yet the side did well to run the home side close (10-14).

Near equilibrium in the playing record had been achieved by the time Exeter travelled to Bristol just before Christmas. Ten games had been won and nine lost but Bristol was to level the balance with a comfortable victory (0-30). There followed the best run of the season with seven straight victories which started with a home win over Exmouth on Boxing Day (18-4). Much more satisfying was victory over Plymouth Albion at Beacon Park to end a year of changing fortunes (9-6).

The New Year should have begun with a much awaited game at Stradey Park against Llanelli but this had to be cancelled. Instead the team had to prepare for the first round John Players Cup match against London Scottish with victories over Clifton away (23-10) and at home to Bridgwater & Albion (29-0). In this latter game Exeter scored five tries on a heavy pitch and the performance was described as “very reassuring”. As it turned out the John Player Cup match had to be postponed because of “arctic conditions”. This might have been a blessing in disguise as Exeter then had two more games to prepare for the big occasion and more time for injured players to recover. At home against Exeter University a routine victory was recorded (19-3) and the following day the team travelled to Exmouth for a Devon Cup meeting which also ended in Exeter’s favour (28-3).

After two weeks of waiting a large crowd gathered at the County Ground for the John Player Cup tie against London Scottish. Anticipation of victory against such a talented side may not have been high and when the Exiles scored seven points in the first ten minutes to which they added a further four points by the half hour mark, home supporters began to think that the outcome of this game would be another “Coventry”, like the match that took place twelve months before. Exeter had ventured only twice beyond half-way. Alastair McHarg, who might have become an Exeter player in 1974, dominated the line-out but in loose play the Exeter pack began to assert some authority and Fred Hartley’s speed to the loose ball blunted Scottish attacks.

A Bob Staddon penalty goal just before the break gave the Exeter supporters some heart and in the second period the Exeter team was transformed. Denying the opposition much good possession, the pack took charge. A loose ball was seized by Clem Davies who charged up to the Scottish line and from a ruck he forced his way over assisted by fellow second rower Tim Woodrow. Staddon converted. Both the full-back and fly-half Webb then kicked successful penalties and so Exeter found themselves four points ahead. For the last quarter of the game Exeter had to defend heroically against a non-stop barrage of Scottish attacks. This was a famous victory for the club. Another view suggested “London Scottish snatched a memorable defeat from the jaws of victory” (15-11).

Exeter then had fourteen days to recover and prepare for the next round game against Rosslyn Park at Roehampton. Unfortunately the weather took a hand again and matches at Bridgwater & Albion and at home to Barnstaple had to be cancelled. Travelling on the morning of the John Player Cup game, Exeter no sooner had stepped of the coach than they were facing the kick-off. Barely three minutes into the game the home team scrum-half Robin Pritchard, who had made the occasional appearance for Exeter when attending St. Luke’s College, made a break that led to a try. Despite ample possession Park could make little headway against a tigerish Exeter defence led by the back row of Steve Webber, Fred Hartley and Simon Day. After about half an hour Exeter found themselves in their opponents half of the field and Steve Webb kicked a fine penalty into the wind from forty yards. In the second half the Exeter forwards began to take charge much to the frustration of the home team pack. After about an hour’s play the immaculate Bob Staddon moved up to fly-half at a set scrum and dropped a goal from thirty yards. It was not only on the field that Exeter made its presence felt as 200 or so travelling supporters drowned out the home support.

Just when it seemed that Exeter defence would hold out, Rosslyn Park was awarded an unlikely penalty at a scrum near the posts on a rare excursion into the Exeter half. The kick was successful and Park scraped through into the next round whilst Exeter, after another heroic performance, was left to reflect on what might have been (6-7).

After the splendid John Player Cup run, Exeter found it difficult to raise their game for a Merit Table meeting with Plymouth Albion at the County Ground and produced, in the words of Terry Davies, “an indifferent display”. Down by seven points at half-time, Exeter’s first points came mid-way through the second half via penalty goal. Thereafter two splendid tries were scored, one by winger John Hoskin who beat four defenders on his way to the line and the other by Steve Webb “after a sparkling

break". Then three minutes from the end, a rare mistake by Staddon allowed Albion to snatch an equalising try (11-11). This drawn game complicated Exeter's position in the South West Merit Table.

Remaining at home Exeter then faced Nottingham, a club with a growing reputation. Neither team was at full strength but Exeter's form improved well enough to produce a victory (8-3). The improvement did not last as three days later, on a cold wet night under the Brixham floodlights, Exeter was hustled out of the Devon Cup competition by a team that played the right game for the conditions (0-11). Terry Davies' verdict of "a total disaster" meant that defeat closed one avenue to the following season's John Player Cup and Exeter now had to beat Camborne to qualify by means of the South West Merit table for that competition.

Only four days later Exeter was in Cornwall for a week-end tour and the prospect of meeting Camborne on its own midden. Playing with character and determination Exeter gained the victory they desired and deserved (10-3). The following day, with the team under less pressure, a more open game was won at Truro (26-10). Back at home Exeter had to come from behind to defeat Cross Keys (11-7) before dominating Sidcup. Although it made no difference to the result, for most of the game spectators thought the margin of victory was less decisive than it was because, in an unusual incident, the referee overruled the two touch judges who thought a Peter Full conversion in front of the posts had failed (28-7).

Still without six first team regulars, Exeter went to Taunton for a mid-week game that proved tougher than anticipated. Two tries early in the match and one near the end saw Exeter home but for fifty minutes in between a light-weight Taunton pack had Exeter going backwards for a lot of the time (16-3). At home a game against Streatham-Croydon ended in a comfortable win but, according to club programme notes, "no one could pretend it was either convincing or interesting". The high-light was probably a rare try scored by prop forward Paul Baxter (23-0).

Easter saw visits by Universities Athletic Union and a fifteen representing Dorset & Wilts. The former game was won with ease (30-9). The latter match was also won but Exeter had to come from behind to achieve victory (17-17). At this point eight games had been won in succession. A trip to London was disappointing when the team narrowly lost to Esher (17-18). In the final game of the season at Kingsholm, Exeter left it too late to close the gap on Gloucester (9-23). It was later recorded that as many as 29 players were unavailable for this game!

During the season ten players appeared for Devon. Among this number was Paul Baxter who captained the County team but who announced his retirement at the end of the season. Clem Davies was also to retire and the ball winning flanker Fred Hartley was to pursue his career in Kent.

As was the norm the "A" XV was often lacking the services of players called-up to the senior team but still managed to win nineteen and draw one of 31 games played. The "B" did well winning eighteen and drawing one out of 25 games. The Colts won twelve and drew two out of 17 games.