

119th Year 1990-1

The club finished the season in 4th position in National Division 3, by winning seven and drawing two of the twelve games played. Two early matches were lost, but a run of five victories raised the possibility of promotion. However events at in the final two rounds of the competition meant that hopes had to be put on hold. This is, said the Annual Report, “a situation everyone is determined to put right next season.”

Overall the club played 41 games, winning 27 of them and drawing four. Of the defeats, six came in the first half of the season and only four in the crowded second half. The club scored 886 points and conceded 435.

Elected captain in his own right, scrum-half Andy Maunder continued to play a pivotal role in Exeter's growing stature in both league and cup competitions. A member of a family engaged in the butchery business, he was noted for performing a forward roll when running out onto the field of play.

The uncompromising flanker Paul Westgate, affectionately known as “Beast”, a teacher at King's College, Taunton, was elected vice-captain.

Exeter demonstrated the club's resolve to enhance performance by organising a mid-week summer training camp at University College, Swansea, over three days in August. Twenty-five players attended and were accompanied by a manager, a physio and two coaches.

After being photographed at the start of the season in black jerseys, the team began playing wearing a basic white jersey with widely spaced narrow black hoops. Variations of this scheme were worn for some five seasons before resorting back to traditional black.

The team made “a sparkling commencement to the season” with emphatic wins at home over Stourbridge (50-0) and first time visitors, Berry Hill, against whom full-back Ian Stewart scored four tries (42-3). Before the first month had ended two competitive games, both at home, were scheduled.

The first was a Pilkington Cup first round game against fellow Division 3 club, Askeans. The game was more of a struggle for Exeter than the score might suggest. The visiting forwards took four strikes against the head and had the Exeter eight going backwards in set scrums. However Harry Langley and Graham Bess ruled the line-outs as the home forwards made inroads into opposition territory. Andy Green, at fly-half, gave a virtuoso performance scoring 32 points in all, a match record for the competition. He scored a try in the 27th minute but Exeter did not cross Askeans' line again until the final ten minutes when Green (twice) and Langley touched down (36-6).

A week later a draw was played out with West Hartlepool, the eventual Division 3 champions, who missed a late penalty goal attempt that would have won the match (18-18). The first defeats of the season soon followed. A friendly in London against Saracens ended in relatively close fashion (15-23) but at Morley, Exeter's poor away performances in the league continued with a disappointing defeat. Exeter led through a penalty try at half time but the home side came out on top on the second period (6-22).

Askeans returned to the County Ground for a National Division 3 game only to lose again but by a much closer score-line (13-7). Exeter then entertained Coventry in a non-competition game, which was won (21-13), before travelling to Fylde for a Division 3 match. The outcome was another draw (11-11), a result that was mirrored at the end of the campaign when both clubs finished with identical playing records.

November was a month of highs and lows. At home Exeter put paid to Camborne's hopes of progressing in the Pilkington Cup (20-10) before defeating Metropolitan Police by a healthy margin at the County Ground (28-3). This score-line was reversed in a League encounter a week later on the

club's first visit to Clifton's new ground at Cribbs Causeway, Bristol (3-28). An even more disappointing defeat followed in the 3rd Round Pilkington Cup match at Sheffield.

Mid-way through the first period Sheffield went ahead with a penalty goal, a lead they held up to the final moments of the game when both teams each failed to score with penalty attempts. Then, in the final minute, Exeter regained possession from a scrum and Andy Green dropped a goal but his effort was, according to The Times, "disallowed amid some incredulity". The referee later commented that "The ball went just outside the top of the right hand post. I consulted the touch-judge and he confirmed it." Both teams, playing in gloom and driving rain on a muddy pitch, had tried to open the game up. "Exeter would have deserved extra-time on the run of play", said The Times (0-3).

If Exeter felt aggrieved by the Cup result, then the team's frustrations were taken out on Cheltenham at the County Ground the following week (58-0). A mid-week draw at Weston super Mare (16-16) preceded another handsome victory against Exeter University (41-6). The two matches in the run-up to Christmas proved to be more than a match for the club in its current state of development – at Beacon Park against Plymouth Albion (6-24) and, in the only home defeat of the season, to Gloucester (9-38).

December ended with two games against more local rivals. On a muddy pitch at Torre Vale North, Torquay Athletic gave a most committed performance and only a last minute kick robbed the team of victory (13-13). Barnstaple, at home, went under more easily (30-8). Exeter travelled to Lichfield for the first game of the New Year. The hosts chose to start the game with the advantage of a blustery wind. If this decision was a gamble then it paid off, as the home side had scored fifteen points without reply by half-time. After the interval Exeter was unable to capitalise on the elements and managed to score only one converted try (6-19).

Exeter did not dwell too long on the Lichfield defeat as the team embarked on a run of five successive victories in Division 3 that started with a home win over Lydney (9-3). The remainder of January and the start of February comprised fixtures with local teams, all of which were won. Among these were Taunton (19-8) and Brixham (9-7) both away plus Devonport Services (17-0) and Crediton (29-7) both at home

February ended with an away Division 3 game at Nuneaton. Exeter's form away from home did not desert them on this occasion (13-9). Two weeks later a home win over Roundhay was registered (13-3). Three days after, Exeter went to the Memorial Ground and held Bristol to a narrow margin (6-13).

A return visit to Sheffield to fulfil a League commitment afforded Exeter the opportunity to avenge the earlier Pilkington Cup defeat and the chance was taken with victory by an ample margin (28-16). According to reporter Guy Shackle, it was "A Grey Day As Tics Flounder" at the County Ground. The visitors were overwhelmed by a fitter, faster and better organised Exeter side.

In early April came the final of the Bass Devon Cup competition. Exeter had progressed to the final through home victories over Exeter Saracens (17-0), Okehampton (20-0) and Barnstaple (29-6). Exeter then had the stiff task of facing Plymouth Albion at Beacon Park. Regarded as under-dogs by the local press, Exeter was said to be facing overwhelming odds. Prospects looked even bleaker when hooker James Kendrew dislocated a shoulder during the opening minutes of the game, His specialist replacement, Steve Melbourne had to leave the field at half time.

At that point Albion, who led by six points, with the elements in their favour, had dominated most of the play. Despite having to reshuffle for the second half, with a back playing on the flank, a flanker moving up to prop and veteran Trevor Harris taking on the hooking role, Exeter then, according to Paul Easterbrook in the Express & Echo, played "with almost unbelievable commitment, composure and lion-heartedness".

With eight minutes remaining and Exeter leading by two points, Albion missed a kickable penalty that might have won them the match. Then, in the third minute of injury time, Craig Barrow started a move that saw full-back Alan Dunkley race in for a try (18-12).

The captain, Andy Maunder, was adjudged Man of the Match and he in turn gave praise to Trevor Harris who proved to be an inspiration for the team. "That was our best performance for perhaps a decade" was the verdict of chief coach Bob Staddon.

Attention then turned to the penultimate Division 3 match of the season. When Vale of Lune came to the County Ground an Exeter victory in this game and the final League match would mean promotion for Exeter but only if second placed Morley, at home, lost to unbeaten leaders West Hartlepool.

Vale of Lune, the team at the foot of the table did not make life easy for the home side. It took a quarter of an hour or so for Exeter to make a breakthrough, with a try by Jeff Tutchings. Vale then took the lead through two penalties before Tutchings touched down for a second try. On the stroke of half-time the visitors regained the lead with a third penalty and then went further ahead with a fourth attempt. Exeter clawed back three points with a penalty from Andy Green and then, "in a heart-stopping finish", the fly-half landed another penalty goal in injury time (14-12).

Relief there might have been in the Exeter camp but the feeling was soon turned to disappointment when it was learned that Morley had assured themselves of promotion. They had secured second spot in the League, defeating champions West Hartlepool by a single point.

The pressure was off when Exeter, at home, defeated struggling Blackheath with ease. On a firm pitch the visitors' defence was soon being pierced, giving away six tries by the end of the game (37-4). Exeter then set off to Broughton Park for the final League game. The Exeter team was not at its best and slumped to defeat against a team that needed to at least a draw to avoid relegation (4-10). This defeat meant that Exeter finished in fourth place below Fylde who had finished on the same number of League points as Exeter but who had a better record of match points scored and conceded.

One consolation for the club was that Andy Green became the top scorer in England with 373 points. The club's leading try scorer for the season was Andy Maunder with 23.

The "A" XV played 30 games, winning 24 and drawing two of them, scoring 850 points and conceding only 261. The "B" lost only two of 26 games played, winning the remainder, scoring 831 points and conceding only 178. The Extra "B" took to the field on 13 occasions, winning seven times and drawing once. The Colts played as many as 33 times winning 23 matches and drawing once. In addition several age-group teams were fielded.