

104th Year 1975-6

Playing two more games than in the previous season, the first team won one more game but lost four more. One game was drawn. The season was reported as “again very successful”. The team suffered a spate of injuries. The forwards were said to have “played well throughout the season but a lack of pace and understanding behind the scrum considerably reduced ... attacking potential”. A record number of points were scored during the season (1,033) but this total was swelled by 130 points registered on a tour of Germany where games against local service teams were played.

Captain for this season was John Lockyer, a native of Teignmouth who joined Exeter in 1970. He quickly became an automatic choice as hooker. His career was interrupted by a long term injury and as part of his rehabilitation he took up refereeing. On returning to first team rugby he regained his place in the Devon XV and was to feature in Regional XVs that faced touring teams and in England regional trial matches. After retirement he became part of the loyal band of ex-players who guided the club through lean times and the recovery that led into the professional era.

The playing season began with a Thursday evening meeting with the Public School Wanderers touring side. The visitors included a handful of local players in addition to others of International and county standard. Among the former was winger Kevin Tarling of Torquay Athletic who was later to join the Exeter club. The pack included the free roaming Scotland lock forward Alastair McHarg who had recently taken up residence in Exmouth. He had appeared for Exeter on the Cornish tour at the end of the previous season but, despite rumours to the contrary, he played no more games for the club. A typical early season game ended with honours even (15-15).

The first Saturday in September was left blank when Glamorgan Wanderers cried off. Exeter retained the same XV that would have played in the cancelled fixture to face Teignmouth on the following Tuesday. The result was that the junior club found itself outclassed. Forty-five points up at half time, Exeter gave a ruthless display. Bob Staddon contributed 26 points with the boot whilst winger Jon Jenkins touched down five of the fourteen tries scored. “It was very pleasing to see our side really playing with a purpose and drive which augours well ...” reported the following week’s match programme a week (82-6).

Four days after this display, Exeter came down to earth with a bump when the touring Esher side won at the County Ground. “Our team’s performance against Esher on Saturday was very disappointing after our previous two matches” said a club programme (6-15). The next two matches followed a similar pattern. At home on a Thursday evening, Exeter over-ran another junior club, Paignton (60-7) only to fall foul at the Recreation Ground against Torquay Athletic who thereby began their centenary celebrations with a notable victory (15-26).

Confidence would not have been very high for the next encounter, a home mid-week meeting with Plymouth Albion. Torquay Athletic, as part of its centenary celebrations, was playing a Devon XV on the same evening. In consequence both teams at the County Ground were under strength, Exeter more so than the opposition. Plymouth Albion had refused a request by Exeter to rearrange the fixture. “It was not a good game to watch” wrote Paul Huddart of the Express & Echo. Exeter prop Brian Steer lost two teeth as a result of a punch and a visiting forward received an on field reprimand from the referee. The visitors had many chances to score but did not take advantage of them. Two Bob Staddon penalties won the game. The Exeter players greeted the final whistle with arms held aloft in triumph (6-0).

The return of County players to the team failed to maintain the momentum when facing Bath at home just four days later. Aided by a strong wind, Bath dominated the first half but led by only three points at the interval. The Exeter pack put in a great performance and the backs defended well but in the second period Bath went ahead mainly through the efforts of England fly-half John Horton (6-16). Another defeat followed at Cross Keys. After half an hour centre Phil Holman had to be stretched off

the field and was detained in hospital overnight. The disrupted back division could make little headway after Holman's departure (3-17).

On arrival at the County Ground, players, officials and supporters from Redruth were greeted with the following paragraph in the match programme. "Unfortunately, our past three games with them (*Redruth*) have not been enjoyed by our players and supporters. We hope they have grown out of the phase they went through when the ball seemed of little importance and have settled down to playing attacking rugby and using the ball and throwing it about". Such comment was unique among the club's Programme Notes. As to the match itself, it would appear from the result that it was the Exeter team that threw the ball about. At this point of the season Redruth had won twelve games in a row but had to succumb to the power of the home forwards (35-4).

The story was different the following week when visitors Saracens proved to be that bit too good for their hosts (9-14). Another defeat soon followed and this time the opposition had a point to prove. The Rugby Football Union had drawn up a list of 45 clubs that were designated "first-class", Exeter was on that list but Birmingham, the home team on this day, was not. Exeter was unable to field a full strength side but, even so, a better performance would have been expected. As one reporter pointedly commented "Exeter ... ought not to be beaten out of sight by their inferiors" (7-31).

Back at home the match programme for the home game with Taunton commented "It is a pity that quite a few of our key players are still injured and we hope it will not be too long before they are fit to play". After the Portway debacle, the team pulled out all the stops to defeat their Somerset rivals with ease (46-3). A mid-week game under the Brixham floodlights proved to be a tougher proposition but the under-strength team edged home (17-13).

Gloucester at Kingsholm would have been a daunting task at any time but Exeter was not only missing key players because of injury. Gloucestershire and Devon were meeting for a County Championship game on the same day. Both club teams were missing players selected for their county but Exeter did not possess the strength in depth enjoyed by their opponents. Exeter had to field a makeshift back row, front row and half back combination that included "B" XV captain Bob Greenham as a late replacement scrum half. The outcome was that Exeter was overwhelmed and suffered its heaviest defeat on record at that time (6-76).

Some consolation might have been found in a defeat of St. Luke's College, captained by John Scott who was still an Exeter playing member (20-6) but the recovery did not last as a still understrength team travelled to Cheltenham and lost (6-19). Three games against local opposition then followed and Exeter managed to win all of them. Firstly Sidmouth, on their own ground, went down in a Devon Cup match (24-4). Away at Torquay Athletic, Bob Staddon returned after an eight week lay-off due to injury and he opened the scoring by dropping a goal. Exeter added two penalty goals but close to the final whistle the home side led having landed four penalty goals. Any hope that this would be a running game had not materialised. Instead it was a niggling affair. Winger Jon Jenkins rescued Exeter with an injury time try when his side had been reduced to fourteen men on the field after an injury to prop Derek Pulford (13-12). At home, Exeter accounted for Barnstaple (19-3) before a temporary setback was met away at Glamorgan Wanderers (10-13).

It would have been the turn of Exmouth to feel a sense of trepidation when welcoming Exeter for the traditional Boxing Day fixture as the home team had yet to win a game all season. To their credit "The Cocks" played well and managed to score a dozen points but the result was never in doubt (39-12). Four victories in a row soon followed for Exeter. Games against Taunton away (28-16) and Clifton at home (32-19) started the sequence. Only a handful of spectators watched the game against Bridgwater & Albion at the County Ground due to the counter attraction of England v Wales on television. After a dull first half, spectators would have been forgiven for thinking they should have stayed at home but play brightened on the resumption and Exeter scored three tries (23-9). An away

win at Camborne was the last in the sequence of victories. The boot of Phil Arbourne was instrumental in the win (16-8). The weather put paid to an away meeting with London Hospital at the end of January.

On the first Saturday in February Gloucester found themselves with “an unexpected vacancy caused by so many necessary switches in fixtures because of so many International and County matches”. After a weather hit home game the previous week, the Gloucester club was keen to provide a home game for its supporters. Into the breach stepped Exeter. Memories of the club’s last visit to Kingsholm at the beginning of November and defeat by 70 points would still have been raw. The gesture was much appreciated by the Gloucester club whose programme notes began “It is with particular warmth and gratitude that we extend our welcome this afternoon to Exeter, who so willingly agreed at short notice to fill the unexpected vacancy”. If the Cherry & White supporters turned up expecting another cricket score then they were disappointed. Exeter did lose but the margin was a lot closer than in the previous encounter (10-32).

A home tie in the Devon Cup found Exeter entertaining Barnstaple. Starting in lethargic fashion, Exeter only opened up later in the game. However too much possession was kicked away. It was only in the second half that Exeter got on top of their opponents scoring three tries and being awarded a penalty try. Bob Staddon kicked 24 points (40-0). During the game hooker John Lockyer dislocated a shoulder that was put back in place on the field by the club doctor. The club captain carried on playing.

A blank Saturday interrupted Exeter’s progress before the club played host to Guy’s Hospital against whom, according to the club programme “Some of our regular players are being rested this afternoon as we have a Cup match tomorrow at Crediton”. On the day the team fielded disposed of the Hospital side quite comfortably (52-12). The decision to rest key players for the Sunday Cup Semi-Final game at Crediton paid dividends because, after a tough struggle, Exeter only just triumphed. Trailing by fourteen points at half time and having been reduced to fourteen men due to injury, Crediton produced a heroic performance in staging a comeback. “Another glorious defeat” wrote Paul Harris the Crediton club historian (17-12). A possible reaction set in a week later on a visit to Beacon Park where the Exeter handling was poor and Plymouth Albion won by a clear margin (3-20).

“Exeter did not have to raise their game to any great heights” to defeat Devonport Services at the County Ground commented the Express & Echo. “The Services fought hard up front and tackled well, but had little else to offer” (41-3). Service teams also provided the opposition for the next three games when a party of thirty players and supporters went on a week’s tour to West Germany. All the games were won with ease against Rhinedahlen Rhinos (40-12), British Army of the Rhine (57-0) and Combined Forces B.A.O.R. (32-6). The tour was a success off the field of play as well.

On its return the team found Avon & Somerset Police a tougher proposition. Flanker Trevor Finbow was carried off after eight minutes and the depleted team managed to hold out for victory (13-10).

The following Wednesday the Exeter team was at the Recreation Ground to face Torquay Athletic in what turned out to be a most dramatic final of the Devon Cup competition. During the season the two teams had met twice with each having won its home fixture. The two teams looked well matched and so it proved to be for “after 80 minutes of hard slogging rugby” the scores were level with each side having kicked two penalty goals. For the first time in a Devon Cup Final, extra-time of a further twenty minutes had to be played. In the intense atmosphere around the ground, the home team twice went ahead with penalty goals only for Bob Staddon to equalise for Exeter with similar scores. Just when a replay at the County Ground appeared likely came the decisive move of the match. From a scrum, skipper Lockyer heeled against the head and the ball was passed along the line to centre Phil Arbourne who put in a grubber kick over the Torquay line. Just as he was about to pounce on the ball, No.8 John Snell was impeded and the referee had no hesitation in awarding a penalty try. The Staddon

conversion was followed by the final whistle (18-12). The match had not produced great rugby but was nevertheless exciting and produced a number of incidents that were subject to much post-match debate. These included an Exeter “try” that was not awarded just before half-time and the shape of the ball. Said John Locker after the match “If it had been a normal rugby ball, Bob Staddon would have won the game for us in normal time”.

The euphoria experienced on winning the coveted trophy quickly evaporated when four successive games were lost. At Sidcup the team, containing five reserve players, was beaten rather more easily than might have been expected (17-35) and then back at home the side went down to Streatham-Croydon by a narrow margin (19-24). On Easter Saturday Bradford paid Exeter a visit for the first time since 1934. Against a strong home team, the men from Yorkshire went home winners (3-21).

Traditional Easter Monday visitors, Moseley, cancelled the team’s tour to the south-west as a party from the club was about to depart to play in Boston, U.S.A. Instead, Exeter agreed to make the journey to play at The Reddings. In fact this was the first game to be played on the ground by the Moseley senior team on an Easter Monday since 1931. Exeter might have regretted accepting the invitation to travel because the team was forced to make some improvisation to its composition. Andy Cole moved from the back row to play prop, Bob Farrell, who had re-joined Teignmouth, returned to the Exeter ranks to play on the wing and a debut was handed to St. Luke’s flanker Ken Higgins. After twelve minutes play Exeter had conceded three tries and at half-time Moseley led by a clear twenty points. A heavy defeat appeared to be on the cards but Exeter staged a come-back with two tries from Higgins and one from Jenkins on the wing. Skipper Lockyer, whose nose was broken during play for the second time in the season commented “If we had not made such a poor start we might have beaten them” (24-16).

Resuming winning ways at home, Exeter, defeated Nottingham (20-15) and British Forces of the Rhine (37-6). At this point Exeter had played four games in six days. A far from full strength team travelled to Esher two days later and achieved a creditable victory albeit by a single point (13-12).

Yet another game was shoe-horned in to the crowded end of season list as the Devon Cup holders had to face the Somerset Cup holders Bath in a qualifying tie for the following season’s John Player Cup competition. The tired Exeter team had to play most of the game on the retreat and, in the process, was guilty of making many errors that were punished by the home team (6-37).

The season had been extended to include the first Saturday in May and to round off the campaign Exeter visited Redruth where they defeated the home side with what the “West Briton” described as a splendid team performance despite continuous first-half rain” (33-15).

Over the season the “A” XV was required to supply many players for first team duty and in consequence did not enjoy as successful a season as previously winning fourteen and drawing two matches out of 33 played. The play of the “B” XV was inconsistent and only ten out of 23 games were won.