

87th Year 1958-9

With Tony Lee remaining in charge, Exeter turned the corner after three consecutive years of poor results. The final playing record published in the Playfair Rugby Football Annual shows that of 38 games played 23 were won and four drawn. The club remained unbeaten until the end of October by which time six games had been won and one drawn.

Playing under revised laws the season opened with victory over new opponents, Public Schools' Wanderers (14-11). At Falmouth both teams played "at a red-hot pace" but it was Exeter's variations of back play that won the day (16-6). Back at home came another success, this time over the touring Esher team (20-0). Despite "winning enough of the ball to have won by 20 points", Exeter had to rely on three long-range penalties by Atkins to defeat Torquay Athletic, who scored the only try of the game (9-6). A mid-week game then saw the defeat of Barnstaple (12-0). Exeter exacted revenge for the defeat by Streatham the previous season with a win, in London, that was sparked off by a dynamic Keith Hopper (14-3). In a match at the County Ground with Devonport Services, both teams tried to play open rugby on a pitch that was "virtually unplayable". Exeter made better use of the ball and won (9-0). After a week-off, due to a Devon game being staged at the County Ground, Exeter returned to London to face Saracens. Outfought up front, Exeter managed to score a breakaway try after thirty minutes to achieve a creditable draw (3-3).

The first defeat of the season, after eight games, came at the County Ground against Penzance & Newlyn. Exeter forsook their normal open games and copied the kick and rush tactics of the opposition, who scored three dropped goals to a converted try (6-9). A second home defeat followed when facing the Royal Marines XV four days later (6-16). Exeter quickly responded at home on the first day of November by posting the highest score of the season against Taunton. Seven tries were scored in all, five by the wingers John Stark (3) and M. Gardner (2). Although soundly beaten the visitors played a full part in the attractive football shown throughout (25-8). "Exeter crashed to an unexpectedly heavy defeat at Bristol where they were over-run by a fast, fit Clifton side" who scored five tries to one (3-17). On returning to home soil Exeter faced Redruth when "the game was as rugged as it was fast". The Sunday Mirror went on to say that "Although this game failed to produce a score it was one of the best at the County Ground this season" (0-0).

From this point up to Boxing Day opposition was provided by teams from Devon. Two games against Exmouth were won, including the Boxing Day encounter, both by the same score (14-3). In between these games Torquay Athletic went down on their own ground after losing a player to injury after thirty minutes (16-6). Barnstaple at home proved again to be too difficult a hurdle to overcome and Exeter, with only one first choice absentee, "were outplayed in every department" (3-9).

The Old Year did not end well when visitors Old Blues beat Exeter for the first time since October 1950 (0-11), but the New Year began well with Exeter remaining undefeated for five matches in a row. Firstly a double was recorded against Taunton on their own ground when a direct approach, on a churned-up pitch, won the day with winger Tony Marks getting a hat-trick of tries (11-5). On a muddy County Ground the Exeter pack outplayed the Ebbw Vale eight whose backs found it difficult to turn defence into attack. After a score-less first half Exeter went into the lead with a John Rew try and an Atkins conversion and held out (5-3). Perhaps the most notable achievement in this run came at Bristol. Even with eight players on county duty, the home club's reserve strength was thought to have been too good for the visitors. For twenty minutes Exeter had much the better of the play and a break by Dick Manley led to a try by out-half Roy Lewis. Bristol fought back and held a three point lead but with two minutes left to play Keith Hopper snapped up a loose ball to race thirty yards to score a try wide out and level the score (9-9).

Two home matches completed the sequence of victories. Against Old Millhillians a fourteen man Exeter, on a bone hard ground, had a number of players leaving the field temporarily for treatment before centre Tony Andrews had to go to hospital with a broken collar bone. Exeter scored five tries in all, three by winger Tony Marks (21-9). Exeter was said to be in complete command for nine-tenths of the game against Weston super Mare but faltered against the visitors' defence. Only one try was scored by the home team and that was by wing-forward Ted Bonner (14-6). A week later the return match with Weston produced the same score line but this time in favour of the Somerset side. Exeter made too many mistakes and kicked poorly (6-14). Another defeat followed when Guy's Hospital came to Exeter. The visitors had the advantage in possession against Exeter's reserve hooker (8-14). A prized win at home to Plymouth Albion provided some compensation. Scrum-half Hopper was outstanding "flinging out the greasy ball in miraculous fashion". As if anticipating the antics of a future club half-back "He even performed somersaults to keep his service going" (12-3). However victory against St. Luke's College again proved elusive in a mid-week meeting (3-11).

For once the tough end of season programme finished in Exeter's favour. Of the last eleven games played only three were lost, another was drawn and the remainder won. Two home victories were recorded next. Bridgend looked like winning when they took a five point second half lead but Exeter drew level with a Tony Lee try. Then in the last few minutes Colin Knowles crossed for the winning score. (14-11). Old Cranleighans went down on Easter Saturday (12-8). Moseley achieved a narrow victory in the Easter Monday meeting in a game described as being "full of thrust and counter-thrust". Exeter led by eight points at half-time through tries by wingers John Stark and Tony Marks. Crucially Derek Atkins was successful with only one conversion. In the second period the visitors hit back with two tries of their own. Both were converted, the second one of which was successful from a difficult angle (8-10).

The Tuesday home game with Leicester was, by contrast, a drab affair. According to the Birmingham Evening Post "The game bore an end-of-season look. It was the dullest meeting between the two clubs since the fixture was instituted shortly after the war." The Exeter forwards proved the stronger of the two packs but the backs were unable to take advantage of the possession provided. Each side kicked a penalty goal (3-3).

Two more defeats in this period came, at home Newport and away at Bath. Exeter provided their Welsh visitors with the stiffest opposition on their Devon tour. The game got off to a slow start but sparked into life during the second period when both sides played attacking rugby (3-11). At Bath the game was played in driving rain and heavy conditions with pools of water accumulating on the pitch. Scrums were prolonged affairs on the boggy pitch and the Exeter forwards proved their worth in the loose but once again all that could be shown for their efforts was a solitary penalty goal. Bath came from behind to win with a penalty and a try (3-6).

The week-end trip to Cornwall towards the end of April brought victories. Against Redruth, "Exeter's win was a triumph of combination over individualism" (8-6). Of the game on Monday it was reported that the Exeter backs disappointed and St. Ives were lucky to escape a heavier defeat (8-0). The last senior game of the season saw the defeat of another team from the Duchy – Falmouth – at the County Ground. Exeter was again said to be "the more accomplished side "taking full advantage of a following gale force wind" (14-0).