

122nd Year 1993-4

The structure of the Courage National Divisions had now been changed by the R.F.U. The top four leagues would in future comprise ten clubs, with each team playing the others on a home and away basis. Exeter had retained its National 3 status but would now face more opponents that had experience of competing in National 2. The change meant eighteen league games were to be played instead of eleven or twelve that had been the case in earlier seasons.

As well as league and cup matches, celebration games to mark a century of the club's occupancy of the County Ground at St. Thomas had also been arranged.

To face the new challenges Andy Maunder was re-elected captain but, as the vice-captain of the previous season, Rob Baxter, had departed to further his career with Gloucester, hooker Rob Pugsley was elected to fill the role.

As a curtain-raiser for the playing season, a game under the County Ground flood-lights between Exeter and Devon. The Exeter squad was well represented as four of their number appeared in Devon colours. Exeter won by a narrow margin with Andy Green kicking five penalty goals to counter four landed by Devon in what was later described as "a drab celebratory game". The County Ground deserved better (15-12).

The first inter-club friendly match of the season took place at Stourbridge where Exeter suffered defeat. All Exeter's points again came from Green's boot (9-17). Victories followed at Beacon Park against Plymouth Albion when "Exeter didn't exactly sparkle" (23-17) and at home against Launceston, "a tough and gritty Western Counties team" (46-0).

September ended with the visit of the Barbarians, the highlight of celebrations to mark the centenary of Exeter making the County Ground its home. In front of a crowd of 5,000, Exeter gave a brave performance against a side containing eight current and four future internationals. The hosts put up a staunch defence with full back Ian Stewart outstanding.

Exeter took the game to the opposition with Andy Green making a couple of early breaks but by half time the visitors had scored four tries and led 24-7. Despite rain in the second half, the Barbarians added five more tries. Exeter scored two of their own, one in each half, through Simon Dovell and Stewart (14-59).

October began with three friendly fixtures, two of which, played at home, ended in victory – Nuneaton (43-14) and Basingstoke (37-11). In between these two games came an evening meeting with Clifton who, this season, found themselves in the league below Exeter. The outcome at Cribbs Causeway, somewhat unexpectedly, was a win for the home side (15-19).

For the second consecutive season Exeter and Clifton were drawn together in the Pilkington Cup. At the County Ground. Clifton proved that the result of the match ten days earlier was not a fluke. Much to the dismay of the home spectators who expected a repeat of the decisive cup victory like that of twelve months earlier, Exeter lost a low scoring game due to problems in both set pieces and loose play. "We made it easy for Clifton" said Wiggins. "Revenge is sweet" pronounced Rugby World (6-9).

The team then discovered the reality of playing in the now strengthened National 3 with five consecutive league games. A visit to Coventry finished with a decisive defeat. Coach Wiggins was not too dismayed. "Yes, they roughed us up a bit and, yes, we were well beaten in terms of physical bulk". Exeter were on top for the first quarter but Coventry slowed play down and gradually got on top. "We have not stopped being a good side" added Wiggins (12-39).

Prospects looked brighter with a draw against Rosslyn Park at the County Ground. Leading by thirteen points “Park squandered their advantage, and a 50 yard Andy Green penalty attempt in injury time nearly gave Exeter the 2 points” (13-13).

The team then lost the league game at Fylde after another disjointed display up front. A turning scrum meant that the ball came out at wrong angles and, in consequence, the backs could not attack enough from favourable positions (6-15). Changes were made in the pack for the home meeting with Havant who had also experienced a difficult start to the season. The changes paid off with a win (25-20).

Cornish rivals Redruth suffered a league defeat on their own pitch (20-9) before Exeter, at home, defeated two Devon opponents in friendly fixtures – Exeter University (16-10) and Devonport Services (23-10).

Remaining at home, Exeter resumed league activity by beating Blackheath (16-3). This win was followed by an agonising league defeat at Morley. The home side took the lead with a converted try before Exeter’s hooker, Scott Kelly, had to leave the field with an injury. Despite the disruption, three Andy Green penalties put the visitors in front until Morley kicked a winning penalty with two minutes left on the clock (9-10).

The next league game, at home against Richmond, produced another close result but this time the satisfying victory belonged to Exeter (21-16). The calendar year ended with a win in a holiday fixture with a President’s XV, also at the County Ground (41-19).

The second half of the season started with three cancelled Saturday games that fell foul of the weather and waterlogged pitches. Activities resumed with a close run win at Weston super Mare by an under-strength team (5-0). In order to give the first choice team a run out before resuming league fixtures, a match was arranged with Brixham at Astley Park. The gesture by the South Devon club to host the Tuesday evening game was much appreciated by the Exeter club. The visitors won the closely contested game (18-6).

The extra practice appeared to pay off when revenge was exacted on Coventry at the County Ground in a high scoring game where a single try separated the two teams (32-27). At Roehampton, Exeter could not maintain the impetus and lost to Rosslyn Park. “Neither side was good enough to maintain a constant promotion position” observed a Park programme (9-21).

The next game at the County Ground was a Devon Cup Quarter Final meeting with Sidmouth that had been delayed for three weeks due to the poor early year weather. Exeter kept the back division from the Rosslyn Park match but made six changes up front. Exeter eased to victory (54-5).

Resuming league engagement at home against Fylde, Exeter achieved a notable win led by skipper Andy Maunder who was making his 250th first team appearance (27-3). Once again Exeter was unable to repeat the home success when losing away at Bedford (14-18). The following week Exeter was to play another away league match again but this time achieved, in the words of club secretary Terry Foley, “a magnificent win” against Havant that revived hopes of a possible promotion push. The margin of victory was thought to be the widest yet in a league game (41-0).

At the beginning of March Exeter, at home, gave a good account of itself against Bristol (6-13) before welcoming g Bideford in a Devon Cup Semi Final. The Western Counties League team had not been doing too well but had performed ably in this competition and put up a brave show against stronger opposition (40-6). Then after a home league win over Redruth (18-12), Exeter entered a mini-slump, losing at Camborne (12-14) and then at Blackheath in a league game (5-22) before scraping a win at Torquay on Easter Saturday (13-11).

A game against Cornwall had been arranged as part of the County Ground 100th season commemoration. “If ever spectators received full value for their money it must have been those who

watched the game on Easter Monday” commented Terry Foley. A fairly representative County Championship XV “was outplayed by Exeter in almost every facet of the game” (27-17).

“Please let us have a repeat performance Exeter” requested the programme for the home game against Morley. It was not to be as the team from Yorkshire defeated Exeter by a single point for the second time in the season. Although the outcome had little influence on promotion or relegation for either side, Exeter had the incentive to seek revenge for the early season defeat. The visitors held a twelve point lead at half time after which the Exeter pack applied pressure. However in a rare visit into Exeter territory Morley landed a decisive penalty and held on to a one point lead during a nervous five minutes of injury time (14-15).

Exeter then contrived to lose at Crediton (6-13) before retaining the Bass Devon Cup against Plymouth Albion at Beacon Park (22-12).

Two final league game remained to be played. Richmond, who stood below Exeter in the table came to the County Ground and won (16-22) but then Bedford, who retained lingering hopes of promotion, arrived to fulfil the fixture that had to be postponed in early January. According to the Guardian reporter “On the day Exeter looked the more confident outfit”. Exeter scored all their points inside the first half hour with a try from Maunder and a conversion and two penalties from Jason Dance, deputising at fly-half for the injured Andy Green. Toward the end of the game Bedford learnt that their slim hopes had been dashed by a result elsewhere. By the end of this game at Exeter, four penalty goals were not enough to gain a final victory (13-12).

This result meant that Exeter finished in sixth place in the league of ten teams, winning half of the games played and drawing another. Overall the First XV played 40 games, of which 24 were won and one drawn.