

84th Year 1955-6

Comments on this season echoed those of the previous campaign – “A most disappointing season from a playing point of view”. Lack of thrust at fly-half and centre three-quarter was most pronounced whilst the forwards proved to be a solid unit that did not receive the support they deserved. The new captain, winger Johnny Stark, played in all Devon’s games as did wing-forward Dick Manley who also shone for the Barbarians at Easter.

The playing record showed a similarity to that of the previous season but this time there was a narrow swing that meant more games were lost than won. Seven losses in nine games played in April tipped the scales against the team’s performance. In all the first team played 41 matches winning 18 and drawing two of them. It also turned out to be a low scoring season.

After a practice game between the Old Heleans and the rest of the club which was drawn (14-14), the season seemed to be set fair when Blackheath was defeated at the County Ground in the first major fixture. What made the victory even more satisfactory was the fact that Exeter had been reduced to thirteen players for a long period through injury (9-6). As it turned out this was the sole win in September. The team went down narrowly at Torquay Athletic despite a late rally (11-12) before suffering a further two defeats on the week-end tour to Wales – Bridgend (3-9) and Ebbw Vale (6-14). The game against Bridgend looked likely to end in a draw but the home team, although reduced to 13 players, stormed to victory in the last quarter. Ebbw Vale made a scrappy start but after scoring eight points close to half time the team held the lead until the end.

October produced four wins and three losses. An away victory over Devonport Services (9-3) preceded a close home game against Bristol which the visitors won (11-16). Three more home victories followed. A satisfying result against Saracens (9-3) was followed by another close game with Old Millhillians (9-6). On the last Saturday of the month at Weston, Exeter again struggled against their Somerset rivals on their own patch (3-6).

Brian Homer decided to retire and Sid Sharp took over the hooking duties in an away victory at Taunton (9-3). The next victory came in the form of another away win, this time at Barnstaple (8-0). On the 26th November Bath finally broke a sequence of defeats at the County Ground. Bath had last seen victory at Exeter on February 14th 1920. Initially the home defence held its own until Bath broke through to score three tries and a dropped goal (0-12).

Exeter went through December unbeaten. Following a draw at home to Torquay Athletic in a game that contained “little good rugby” (3-3), victories were obtained away against Falmouth (5-0) and at home to St. Ives who, in fact, controlled three parts of the game (11-5). A home draw with Old Blues (3-3) was followed by the now traditional Boxing Day meeting with Exmouth. The game was said to have been played in good spirits with the former Exeter player John Roach taking charge of the whistle. Exeter won the game (6-0). A visit by Newport on the last day of the year ended in defeat for the Cornishmen (11-5).

The New Year began with a narrow home win over Taunton. All Exeter’s points were scored early in the game whereupon the visitors from Somerset hit back and a missed conversion front in front eight minutes from the end prevented them from achieving a draw (11-9). Three defeats then followed. T Honor Oak Park against Guy’s Hospital the pitch was in a sea of mud. Exeter tried to play an open game “on the mud they created” according to the Observer reporter! The tactics did not work (3-8) At Plymouth Albion the team again went down narrowly (0-5) . Barnstaple then sprang a surprise on Exeter when they notched a rare victory at the County Ground (3-11). February was almost a blank month with severe weather taking its toll on three matches. The one game that was staged at the County Ground was played on a snow covered pitch where London Hospital was defeated (8-3).

The up and down performances continued with a narrow home defeat by Plymouth Albion (0-3). A mid-week fixture at the County Ground saw a XV drawn from the company of H.M.N.Z.S. Bellona face a club team that included Brian Homer and Gerry Brown both of whom had previously announced their retirement from the game. The ship had returned to the U.K. to be decommissioned at Devonport. While awaiting a new assignment the New Zealand ship's rugby team defeated their hosts in reasonably comfortable fashion (3-11).

Two days later Exeter managed a narrow home win over Devonport Services (6-3) and followed this with another tight victory at Paignton (3-0). Two equally close games followed but in both cases Exeter was the losing team. The margin at Cheltenham was a single point (5-6) but to lose by three points the following week at home to Old Cranleighans would have been a disappointing result (0-3).

There might have been hope of a strong finish to the season when Easter Monday witnessed the defeat of Moseley. Exeter scored a try and two penalty goals to their opponents solitary late try (9-3). Hopes were dashed when the next seven games all ended in defeat. Tuesday visitors Leicester, according to The Times, was "much more skillful behind the scrummage" and so won with comfort. The Leicester forwards won a lot of possession but the Exeter defence held the visitors to three points at half time but "gradually the power and persistence of the visitors' attacks gradually told". Leicester scored five tries in all but "Exeter were far from disgraced". The Express & Echo labelled the game "Jago's Match" after the 18 year old John Jago from Exeter School registered all Exeter's points with three penalty goals and a try. "His try was the result of a thrilling individual run" said The Times (12-23).

A reporter from "The Times" was also present at Exeter's next game, that against Wasps at Sudbury. "Wasps Make Merry Against Exeter" ran the subsequent headline. Exeter found themselves eleven points down by half time. The team had more of the play in the second half but still had to concede a further eight points. "Exeter lost several openings in the second half by failing to run straight" (0-19). The week-end trip to Cornwall produced two further losses. Redruth gave a bright display scoring two tries to one (5-12) and in another open game Pezance & Newlyn edged home by a similar margin (3-9). Returning home to face Newport, Exeter had to play over half the game with fourteen men after scrum half Ted Wishlade had to leave the field through injury (0-9). Four days later Exeter's lack of success continued with a home defeat by Gloucester (6-16).

The losing sequence extended to seven games before Weston super Mare arrived at the County Ground to fulfill a fixture that had to be postponed earlier in the year. The match certainly had an end of season feel about it. Weston had absentees playing in a seven-a-side competition and arrived three men short. Exeter found replacements for the opposition one of whom was Alf Hunt. Despite the handicap suffered by their opponents, Exeter scraped a win by a single point (9-8).

At the Annual General Meeting it was reported that the many injuries that blighted the club had enabled the selection committee the chance to give youthful players in the senior team. Peter Steele-Perkins urged the club to live off income and not capital whilst the continuing drop in gate receipts was blamed on the weather and competition from television. The benefit of arranging guarantee matches was again called into question. Roy Pike announced his retirement from the game.

Just before the season started it was learned that Captain Michael Wright of The Devonshire Regiment had been killed in action in Negri Sembilan in Malaya. As a wing forward Michael Wright was a regular selection for the first XV for two seasons between 1952 and 1954.