

128th Year 1999-0

Another season in Allied Dunbar Premiership League Two saw Exeter start off with a home fixture against Waterloo. According to the visiting captain it was “only a series of injuries and a sin-binning which made the result look one-sided”. Exeter scored five tries to one (39-17).

The following week at Headingley the boot was very much on the other foot for Exeter when opposing Leeds Tykes. Due to a Yorkshire cricket match taking place at the same complex, this game saw an evening kick-off. The home side wore the Exeter down after the visitors had gone into an early ten point lead. By half time Leeds were ahead and in the second half they then applied pressure on their opponents and scored two more late tries whilst Exeter was unable to add to the early scores. After the game The Exeter coach, Ian Bremner, revealed that a number of players had suffered from a stomach bug on the long journey but he refused to offer this as an excuse for what was a comprehensive defeat (10-32).

Recovery soon came when Orrell visited the County Ground. “The best display of a one-sided game came from the elements” said the Western Morning News. With score at three points each, rain bucketed down accompanied by thunder and lightning. After leading by eight points at the interval, Exeter went on to score twenty-seven more without reply. Four of their five tries came from the forwards (38-3).

Exeter continued their home success in more clement weather against Wakefield. The visitors made a calamitous start when, with less than a minute gone, a fluffed clearance allowed winger Craig Townsend in for a try. Even then Exeter appeared to be having an off day, kicking away a lot of possession. With the aid of Sam Howard’s boot the home side led by two points at half time. Exeter’s play improved in the second half but even then the score was all square with minutes left to play. At last Exeter’s forward power was rewarded with a penalty try to be followed by a dropped goal. Both sides registered three tries but twenty points from full back Sam Howard proved decisive (35-25).

Exeter left it late again on a visit to The Reddings to face Moseley who had made an impressive start to the season. The visitors found themselves eleven points behind with ten minutes to play. Salvation again came courtesy of the pack with two tries that were both converted. Sam Howard, now at fly-half, contributed ten points (20-17).

A more comfortable victory came at home against Manchester. This time the backs matched the forwards for tries – three apiece – whilst the visitors scored only one (44-25).

On a visit to Rugby Lions, Exeter scored another six tries with Brian Meinung and Richard Baxter each scoring two. The home side touched down only once (45-22).

Henley Hawks’ visit to the County Ground was not a happy one for them. Because of an accident on the M4 their journey took six hours and kick-off was delayed until 4 p.m. Then they could managed only two penalties to match Exeter’s four tries (31-6).

A break in competitive fixtures found Launceston travelling to Exeter for a friendly fixture. Exeter ran in eight tries by eight different players (53-4). A trip to Bedford for a Tetley Bitter Cup encounter followed. A comfortable victory against the Athletic was the outcome (29-14). However Exeter’s fortunes were reversed on the return to League fixtures at Rotherham. Each side was awarded a penalty try to which Exeter added one try and Rotherham another two but the home kicker landed 21 points whilst Sam Howard could only manage five (15-36).

An injury hit London Welsh came to the County Ground and found no answer to the direct tactics employed by Exeter. Both Exeter tries were scored by driving mauls over the opposition line (19-12). Then came a visit to Coventry whose coach had been “stood down” twenty-four hours earlier. This action may have prompted the home club to change its playing style and adopt open tactics even in

the in Arctic conditions. Exeter might have held a fifteen point lead at half time but for an off-the-ball tackle by Jon Fabian that led to a penalty try. Coventry dominated the second half to win (33-42).

A weather hit, muddy, County Ground welcomed Worcester for the next game. The home side went behind in the sixth minute but two Howard penalties took the team into the lead after twenty minutes. However Worcester hit back to lead by one point half time. Then with the advantage of the wind and Howard's positional kicking, Exeter set up a maul near to the line for Blair Foote and Rob Baxter to drive Del Cross over for his first try of the season (16-10).

The last scheduled game of 1999 at West Hartlepool had to be called off because of frost but the decision came after the visitors had made the long journey.

Exeter's first game in the new Millennium found the club away to London Welsh in the Tetley Bitter Cup. After defeating the Exiles a month earlier in the season, the outcome of this game was disappointing for Exeter. Welsh took an early lead and it was not until the second half that the visitors hit back when Mark Woodman scored a try, after the home side had been reduced to fourteen men. It was of small consolation that Exeter "won" the second half (14-18). A week later an Allied Dunbar fixture saw Exeter return to Old Deer Park. The outcome was disappointing again with Welsh claiming victory by ten points on this occasion. Phil Sluman and Blair Foote claimed Exeter's tries (14-24).

Better news lifted spirits when Exeter avenged an earlier defeat by Coventry overwhelming the Midland club at the County Ground. Four tries were scored by the forwards as well as a penalty try were awarded (35-6). Heads would have again drooped the following week when the club was not only beaten at home but were unable to register a single score. The visiting team was a rampant Rotherham (0-34).

Filling a blank date in the calendar, Exeter travelled to Penryn to play a hastily arranged fixture. Opening the game up at every opportunity Exeter ran in ten tries but it took fourteen minutes of play to register the initial score. Full-back Craig Townsend recorded a hat-trick. The Cornish team stuck to its task well and were, according to the Western Morning News, "Beaten but not disgraced", scoring a consolation try near the end (56-7). Another friendly fixture followed as the Royal Navy team came to the County Ground. Exeter touched down eight times. The Navy, in reply kicked two penalties (50-6).

Away at Henley in a League game Exeter's margin of victory was not as clear cut as might have been hoped. Three tries were scored against one by the home team (31-21). A more emphatic win followed against Rugby at the County Ground. This game marked the 150th senior appearance by skipper Rob Baxter. His brother, Richard added to the family celebrations was by scoring two of his side's seven tries (53-10).

At Manchester each side scored two tries but Sam Howard's boot provided the fourteen point winning margin (24-10). At Worcester, Exeter notched four tries to one by the home team but on this occasion Howard was unable to match the home kicker's efforts (24-28). Howard redeemed himself a week later when Moseley came to Exeter. Each side registered two tries but then a penalty and a dropped goal from the fly-half just pipped a conversion and penalty by the visitors (16-15).

Just when all seemed to be going well Exeter slipped up badly on a visit to Wakefield, a team that stood well below them in the league. A displeased Ian Bremner was quoted as saying "We were dreadful. We looked like a team that hadn't seen each other before." Wakefield scored only one try but it should have been more. All the visitors could manage were three Howard penalties. This was Exeter's third defeat in visits to Yorkshire during the season (9-22).

However, visit to Lancashire brought a change. Facing Orrell, Exeter was awarded a penalty try that enabled the team to achieve a narrow victory (29-23). An even closer finish came next at the County Ground. Second placed Leeds scored more tries but Howard's boot again made the difference (13-10). The same score-line, again in Exeter's favour, was the result of the match at Waterloo. Each team scored one try and only a penalty separated the opponents (13-10).

Two games were left to play in May including a re-arranged game following a postponement earlier in the season. Both matches were against West Hartlepool who stood firmly rooted to the foot of the table. A dispirited home team proved to be no match for Exeter who could not have been expecting such an easy end to the season. Exeter ran in eight tries whilst their opponents could manage only two penalty goals (55-6). Five days later at the County Ground it was all one-way traffic again as Exeter accumulated the highest score the club had so far registered in competitive rugby. Exeter recorded eleven tries with Andy Beattie claiming a hat-trick. The visitors stood scoreless (81-0).

These final two games enabled Exeter to secure a fourth place spot in Allied Dunbar Division 2. They stood alongside Worcester on 38 points but the Midlanders could display a superior difference in points. No. 10 Sam Howard was the league's top scorer with 312 points, nearly fifty points ahead of his nearest rival. His tally composed 5 tries, 55 conversions, 54 penalties and 5 dropped goals. Howard was thus responsible for 42% of the team's total points.

Since season 1996-7 Exeter had entered what was styled a Reserve team in the Devon Cup competition. Rivalry amongst the Devon clubs was always intense and this season the rivalry seemed more intense. In a Quarter Final encounter, Ivybridge found themselves facing an Exeter team that included ten players with Allied Dunbar experience. Having to adopt damage limitation tactics at the County Ground, Ivybridge battled on to the end of a game that "left a few players out of action" (94-16). In the semi-final, two Plymouth Albion players were red-carded, one for a head-but and the other for a high tackle (38-16). Exeter lost in the Final to Barnstaple (3-9).