

86th Year 1957-8

A change of captaincy failed to bring about a change in fortunes for the club. Again less than a third of the matches played ended in Exeter's favour. As many as eight games were drawn but still over half the games played ended in defeat.

A.S.E. (Tony) Lee, whose family ran the long established printing company Sydney Lee (Exeter) Ltd. was elected captain. A now regular performer in the second row of the scrum, he developed a keen tactical awareness on the field that eventually helped the club to re-establish its standing amongst the senior Devon clubs. After retirement from the field of play, he became a tireless committee member not only for Exeter but also the county. He served as Devon's representative on the Rugby Football Union committee as well.

To open the new season Exeter welcomed tourists Saracens on the first Saturday of September. A report of the game in The Sunday Times opened with the comment "After fading towards the end of last season Exeter have been practising hard to ensure a good start for the 1957-8 campaign". The club's preparations appeared to have paid off when the team went into an eight point lead and looked like it was heading for a convincing victory. For thirty minutes the two teams were evenly matched. The breakthrough came when scrum-half Lewis cut through for a try. Shortly afterwards wing Dai Hill scored another that Derek Atkins converted. Saracens attacked for most of the second period but the Exeter defence held firm until ten minutes from the end when the visitors went over for a converted try to which was added a brilliant dropped goal almost as the final whistle blew (8-8).

On the second Saturday of the month Blackheath were due to visit the County Ground but the Kent club decided to cancel their West County tour. Exeter had first appeared on the Blackheath itinerary in season 1948-9 since when the two sides had met on seven occasions with Exeter being victors four times. Streatham filled the vacancy and the south London club narrowly defeated their hosts (6-9). Mid-week found Exeter facing another touring team from the south-east. This time the opposition was provided by Esher and Exeter won comfortably (19-5).

After the promising start to the season, Exeter's form fell away as five defeats were suffered in the next half dozen matches. The first two came against local clubs Torquay Athletic (3-5) and Paignton. and the next pair came against Bridgend and Ebbw Vale on the week-end outing to Wales. Devonport Services was held to a draw at The Rectory (6-6) before Saracens made a return trip to the County Ground. This time the club from London scored one point more than in the opening fixture and that single point was enough to defeat the home team (8-9).

After two more victories against local opposition, another upset came when the club visited Taunton and came away with a sizeable defeat after what the Taunton Courier described as "an exciting game" (6-16). Exeter redressed the balance with a home win over Old Millhillians (8-3) but the next three games were all lost – one, a return visit to Devonport Services (3-8), and the other two at home to Redruth (6-22) and London Hospital (13-14).

December began with four matches against Devon opponents. Those against Torquay Athletic, Teignmouth and Exmouth were won but a visit to Barnstaple ended in defeat (11-16). For the last encounter of the year, Exeter faced Old Blues at the County Ground where the home side put on an encouraging display to win with some ease (18-6).

Unfortunately the New Year did not bring a continuation of this success. "Taunton's 'Double' Over Exeter" ran the headline of the Taunton Courier report which went on to say that "neither team showed much skill and open play was kept to a minimum by close covering and sound tackling by both sides". Brian Homer won a lot of possession for Exeter but the backs failed to make use of it. The visitors from Somerset scored two tries before Exeter scrum-half, Keith Hopper, nearly scored

after evading three tacklers but the fourth stopped him just short of the line. Exeter's only score came from a Derek Atkins penalty goal five minutes before the end (3-6).

The period from mid-January until mid-April produced a mixed bag of results starting with a draw at Redruth (3-3), defeat at Plymouth Albion (8-14) and a win at home against Clifton (19-9). Defeat in Cornwall against Penzance & Newlyn (5-17) preceded a run of six games when Exeter went undefeated. This successful run was only narrowly achieved as four of these games ended in a draw though the other two were won by ten points or more. The highlight was probably a home revenge win over Plymouth Albion (11-0).

The unbeaten run came to an end at Cheltenham (3-6) and this defeat was followed a week later by another at Weston super Mare (9-15). Easter began in promising fashion with the defeat of Old Cranleighans (11-0) and an Easter Monday draw with Moseley (12-12). "There was not a dull moment in the game in which fortunes fluctuated continually" reported the Birmingham Post. Moseley scored their dozen points in the first half. Exeter then chipped away at the deficit. Atkins kicked a penalty and wingers Stark and Knowles both scored tries. In the last minute scrum-half Lewis dropped a goal to bring the scores level.

The following day Leicester proved to be too powerful for the home side (6-21) but four days later Exeter recovered to register a home win over Bath. The home loose forwards, who more or less controlled the game, smothered the visitors attacking attempts. Derek Atkins kicked a penalty and, five minutes after the interval, converted a try scored, appropriately, by No.8 Dick Manley.

The usual tough close to the season saw Exeter suffer four straight defeats. The team was no match either for Newport in a mid-week game (6-20) or for Bristol (3-29). A better performance was shown against Gloucester in the last senior fixture of the season (11-13). These three games all took place on the County Ground. Sandwiched in between came a defeat at Falmouth (0-6).