

## 78<sup>th</sup> Year 1949-0

Over one hundred players had presented themselves for pre-season training and trials, yet, at the end of the season, the captain, Jack Harrison, stated that the club's chief weakness was an inadequate reserve strength. He was probably talking of quality rather than quantity as he went on to add that some players needed to master basic skills. It turned out to be a patchy season as far as results are concerned. A good start was followed by a poor spell when injuries set in. A purple patch followed but then eight of the last ten games ended in defeat.

A win against an improved Exmouth team at the County Ground was the first of six straight victories. Remaining at home Exeter then overcame Taunton with a beautiful dropped goal by Roy Pike, a Gerry Brown try and an Eric Chave penalty goal. Exeter, although dominating the second half, did allow the visitors to reduce the deficit (9-3). Away from home the team notched wins over Sidmouth, in a midweek evening game, (19-0) and Torquay (10-0).

Bath then came to Exeter for an evening encounter and went down to their fourth loss in seven games. The home team maintained its unbeaten record but only by the narrowest of margins. A Bath correspondent thought a draw would have been a fairer result, especially as the visitors scored two tries to one. It was a rousing game, thoroughly enjoyed by a large and appreciative crowd. "Although the play of the pack at last equalled the game of the three-quarters and halves, the home side only just defeated a thrustful Bath side". Down at half-time, Exeter recovered in the second period mainly due to the brilliant play of Roy Pike (9-8).

In contrast, four days later, Exeter and visitors Devonport Services served up an inept display that contained only five minutes of worthwhile rugby. A stodgy game was of no help to the watching Devon selectors (8-5).

The first defeat of the season came at Weston super Mare. Already weakened by county calls, the team suffered another blow when Jack Harrison dropped out of the team in the dressing-room due to a poisoned arm. His place was taken by Ray Hilton of Wasps, the brother of John the Exeter second-row forward. To make matters worse, just before half-time Roy Pike was taken to hospital with a suspected fractured jaw. Despite a valiant fight Exeter suffered a narrow defeat (3-6).

Without a regular half-back pairing Exeter did well at home to draw with Redruth (3-3) but on the following Wednesday a young and speedy Royal Marines Representative XV took advantage of Exeter blunders to inflict a first home defeat. Even so, with Harrison back and Yendell filling in at scrum-half, Exeter played much better than in the previous two games and produced some "delightful rugby" (6-11).

A home win against Barnstaple was marred by another injury when John Roach had to leave the field with a cut eye (8-0).

A first visit to Sudbury to face an unbeaten Wasps side ended in the heaviest defeat since September 1937 though, according to The Times, "The score by no means reflected the general run of the play" as it was "not until the last few minutes that the Wasps established any pronounced superiority". In this match, the brothers John and Ray Hilton opposed each other in the line-outs (3-27).

At the Rectory both teams engaged in handling movements despite a greasy ball. Bill Sanders returned to the team but this time as a prop to support for "B" team hooker "Ginger" Read.

Exeter went eleven points up in the first half, to which lead the Royal Naval Engineering College responded too late (14-6).

Exeter then went to Cranford to face Exmouth on the day of a county match. Exeter had only one representative in the Devon team so the first defeat by the Cockles since 1938 came as something of a surprise (5-6). The first visit by Penzance & Newlyn to the County Ground produced a fast and enjoyable game. Exeter held sway in the first half whilst the visitors were on top in the second and, had they a reliable goal-kicker in their midst, they would have won (3-3). At Mountfields in Taunton, Somerset Police and Exeter played out a scoreless draw in slippery conditions. Both teams opted to play fast open rugby but neither could score. Eric Chave sliced a penalty attempt at goal from 35 yards out in the last minute (0-0). A fourth consecutive game without a win came with a visit to the capital for a game with London Hospital (11-19). Respite then followed with a week-end without a match due to a county fixture at the County Ground.

Exeter's poise was recovered with four victories in a row. A game at home against Torquay Athletic was played in lashing rain and sleet in the first half. On a now churned up pitch "Exeter had the better of the match which was mainly a battle between the packs". Gerry Brown scored the game's only try which resulted from a passing movement. Roy Pike made a welcome return after injury (3-0). Exeter gave their home supporters an early Christmas present when Old Blues were defeated on Christmas Eve (9-0).

For a mid-week encounter with touring Ebbw Vale, Exeter gave a second outing to 17 year old S.J. (Sean) McDermott, a student at Blundell's School. The red-headed Irishman proved to be the star of the show as Exeter won in front of a crowd of 5,000. "Many told one another "There is a future international"" after his storming display. They were correct in their prediction but it was not until 1955 that McDermott won his two caps for Ireland. Exeter fielded eight county players in this game (6-5).

A New Year's Eve win at Paignton brought a fitting conclusion to the first half of the season's campaign (11-8).

The initial match of 1950 proved to be a disappointment. The post-match verdict by the Express & Echo was "Never change a winning pack". The game with visiting Bridgend "developed into an unexciting maul" (0-13). For a Monday game, Balliol College, Oxford, had to enlist two local players to make up their team and Exeter proved to be far too strong for the tourists. "McDermott and Pike had a field day" (34-13).

Continuing a winning trend, Exeter showed "a glimpse of immediate post war form" at home to Old Paulines (24-5). Another home game followed as the match against Devonport Services was switched because the Rectory was undergoing refurbishment. Exeter could not reproduce the form of a week earlier but still won (5-3). The run of wins was interrupted by a scoreless draw at Beacon Park where Exeter met Plymouth Albion and when poor weather yet again tried to spoil the match. Nevertheless it was reported that the game was "packed with incident and thrills" (0-0).

At Barnstaple, where the pitch was in a sodden state, "the game did not reach a high standard with ragged scrummaging and a high number of penalties". Chave converted three penalties for Exeter while the home team scored the only try (9-3). A visit by Royal Naval Engineering College was spoilt by a high wind, showers and "a swamp of a pitch" which, combined with

indifferent rugby “robbed the game of entertainment value”. One good handling movement after fifteen minutes brought a try for Gerry Brown but Mc Dermott did not like the conditions and, for once, had a poor game (3-0). Then Teignmouth’s ground record was taken. Exeter outclassed the opposition in all departments but in mitigation it must be recorded that the home team had been reduced to thirteen fit men by the end of the game (22-10).

Clifton put a stop to Exeter’s run of victories when another scoreless draw was registered at the County Ground. Despite the score-line and a muddy surface both teams, on their first meeting for eleven years, played an open game which was more interesting than the score suggested (0-0).

Still at home Exeter managed to defeat Plymouth Albion even though only two scrums were won in the whole game. Possession came mainly from Les Davies in the line-out. Eric Chave landed a 50 yard penalty that decided the result. It was thought that Exeter deserved to win as they fielded a better back division (3-0). A win at home against Old Millhillians was more convincing (18-0).

A first visit to the County Ground by London Irish witnessed the start of a poor run that lasted to the end of the season. The Irish forwards put on a robust display. The home backs were the better than their opponents but a failure to take the chances that came their way lost them the game. The visitors won with a late dropped goal (0-3).

To mark the Jubilee of the Withycombe club a team was fielded at Raleigh Park for the first time. Exeter won the unofficial Thursday evening game (9-0).

Exeter’s third visit to London in the season ended, like the others, in defeat. The victor this time was Saracens (12-17). Post-match activities came by courtesy of former fly-half, Peter Steele-Perkins, who entertained the party to an evening at the London Hippodrome to see Les Folies Bergère. Eric Chave was said to have appeared on stage but in what capacity is not reported.

Back at home, opponents Bristol scored eleven points in the first quarter of an hour. Exeter recovered well and by the end the visitors had to cling on desperately to a three point lead. The local view was that a draw would have been a fairer result (8-11). During this game the home supporters witnessed another incident that passed into the folk-law of the club. Just before half-time, following a collapsed scrum, Percy Cousins lay unconscious on the field. He was carried off on a stretcher to the speedway track to await the arrival of an ambulance. Just as the stretcher was about to be lifted into the vehicle, Percy threw off his covering blankets and, dodging the out-stretched arms of the attendants trying to restrain him, he rushed back to join his colleagues for the remainder of the match!

Two wins did follow over the Easter week-end but they were the last of the season. Though there was no scoring in the first half, the game against Old Cranleighans was played at exhilarating pace from start to finish. In the end Exeter enjoyed a comfortable victory (21-0). The Monday game with Coventry, on their first visit in over forty years, was something of a disappointment. The visitors made six changes to their announced line-up and did not play up to expectations. Wind and rain during the game did not help. Nevertheless the result was considered to be one of the highlights of the season. Due to injuries Exeter played a young

Terry Allen at full-back and Ray Hilton as centre. Tiring forwards were grateful for some long touch kicks from Sean McDermott (12-3).

The first of five consecutive defeats came in an evening meeting with Leicester. In contrast to the game against Coventry the previous day, play was exciting up to the final whistle. Exeter was denied a hat-trick of Easter victories by the thickness of the proverbial coat of paint. A Leicester conversion attempt went over via a post but a later attempt by Chave hit a post but stayed out (6-8).

The post-Easter week-end tour to Wales was disappointing as far as results were concerned though the club maintained its reputation for playing attractive football. After a defeat by Bridgend (0-11), the Monday meeting at Ebbw Vale might well have been cancelled had Exeter not been on tour. Exeter agreed to play even though the party had undertaken an eight mile morning tour of a local steel plant. A grand fight was made but the backs were bogged down by the muddy pitch that made the forwards even more leg weary. Due to injuries received in the previous match Exeter fielded two substitutes from the Newport club whilst Jack Harrison and Alfie Hunt provided lone vocal support from the stand (8-14).

Injuries received on tour affected selection of the team that faced Gloucester at the County Ground and, to make matters worse, the team was reduced to fourteen men for over half the game following H.C. Drew's removal to hospital with a cut eye. The team effort was described as "a plucky display" (0-11).

For the final match of the season, at home to Newport for the first time since 1923, the visitors were thanked in the club programme for their support during the Welsh tour. The Welsh players threw the ball around leaving Exeter defenders breathless and the crowd gaping in admiration (0-14).

A month that started with promise ended with a defeat by Bideford in the Devon Sevens tournament on the last day of the season.

The club's entry in the Playfair Rugby Football Annual reports that "the season's record, although not quite as good as in the previous season, was fairly satisfactory considering that the fixture list was the strongest in the history of the club". Highlights were recorded as being double victories over Torquay Athletic and Plymouth Albion in addition to the defeat of Coventry at Easter. The final tally showed 22 wins and five draws in a total of 41 games played.

