

56th Year 1927-8

Willie Brock, elected as captain for a second consecutive season (and third in total), unlike the season before when he appeared in every game, was unable to complete this campaign following an injury received at Torquay in mid-February. Meanwhile his younger brother J.C. (John) often took his place in the team. Willie did return to play for a couple more seasons.

About the same time that the captain was injured it was announced that Henry Rew had joined the Tank Corps after which his appearances became far less regular.

The season began with five straight victories that gave hope of a very successful season but fourteen defeats in the last eighteen games in the final three months dashed that hope. The loss of form could not be solely attributed to the absence of the captain and their county prop forward.

At Taunton in the opening fixture a weakness in the home half back combination was exploited. Centre W.L. Osborne at one point called for a “mark” that was not awarded. Whilst the defence hesitated he dashed off to score a try (10-0). Incessant rain spoilt the home mid-week fixture with Tiverton. Two Exeter forwards had been selected to play for Devon against the touring Waratahs team the following Saturday. T.R.K. Jones did not play against Tiverton but Henry Rew did. He was “not much in the picture” (10-0). Another home win, over Teignmouth, came next (13-6).

The opening sequence of victories was completed by a well-deserved win at home over Devonport Services (8-0) that was followed by a somewhat surprising away defeat of Cheltenham (9-6). “One doubts if Exeter have had a side since the war better able to play the game from a scientific point of view” was one comment.

When Exeter met Camborne at the County Ground on the first day of October both teams were unbeaten. At the end of the match it was the team from the Duchy that left with its record intact. All the scoring came from penalty goals (3-6). One of these was awarded when the Exeter scrum half H. Davey was sent off for allegedly aiming a kick at an opponent – a rare occurrence for an Exeter player. Davy was subsequently suspended for fourteen days by the Devon R.F.U.

Paignton without a win to date went under on their own ground (13-3). Included in the Exeter team was H. Arscott a former association footballer and S.J. Smith a Stroud and Gloucestershire player who was temporarily resident in the city but his name soon disappeared from the Exeter team sheet. Both of these players were included in the strong team sent to play Cardiff at the Arms Park. Fielding two senior teams again Cardiff again designated their team that faced their Devon opponents as “Cardiff 2nd (First) team”. The match programme welcomed Exeter and acknowledged that “They are out to play a typically open game, and for this they will be greatly appreciated, win or no win”. It was “no win” for the visitors but the margin was not overwhelming, Exeter’s points being scored by Noel Morgan (5-16).

A blank Saturday due to a county game at Exeter preceded a home defeat by Barnstaple in front of a good crowd. The selection of Morgan on the wing instead of out-half was

questioned by the Exeter press whilst the North Devon journal thought it to be “a glorious game”.

Without Jones and Rew the Exeter forwards still managed to dominate the Wellington pack in wind and rain on Somerset soil but only a draw resulted (3-3). At home again, after a well contested open game against the Royal Naval Engineering College (11-0), both the Exeter forwards and backs gave a good account of themselves against Edgware (13-9). The London club was another putting fielding two “First XV’s” on the same day - their “other” team was at Portsmouth.

A strong mid-week team defeated Blundell’s at Tiverton (11-3) two days before facing Plymouth Albion in the mud at Beacon Park in front of 1,000 spectators. Albion were again fielding two senior sides, the other losing at Wellington. Exeter failed to score for the first time during the season in a game that was played “in a delightful spirit” (0-17). At one point due to a quickly taken line out, unnoticed by the players, two balls were present on the pitch and two mini matches were played out for a few seconds before the referee called a halt the “amusing incident”.

Exeter lost again at home to Exmouth before a comparatively small crowd (0-5) but then “the play of the Exeter team delighted the spectators at Newton” despite the ball being difficult to handle. Exeter tired towards the end of the game but was decidedly the better team. The result, however, was a draw (6-6). The Exeter scores came by courtesy of the Wilcocks brothers, D.P. scoring a try and J.F. kicking a penalty from near half way that struck an upright before going over.

After being all square at Brixham with no score at half time the home team ran out winners after “a splendid tussle” (3-6). At home attractive three-quarter play helped the defeat of Weston (15-6). The Christmas Eve fixture at Exmouth was spoilt by a sticky pitch and a greasy ball. Exeter had opportunities but lacked finish. R.G. Rew retired with a damaged hand and Exeter rallied on his return to the field but the effort came too late to effect the score (0-16).

The weather then took a hand and the worst blizzards for forty years left a blanket of snow that prevented play in three more games scheduled for December. The first game of 1928 was a local affair. A club team titled Exeter Nomads faced Old Heleans. Although the status of the fixture is not clear, the result may have been included in the official first team record (21-9).

First team fixtures were resumed when Taunton visited. The Somerset team led by eight points to nil after twenty minutes before Exeter staged a remarkable comeback and notched seven tries, all by the three-quarters (29-11).

Another match of uncertain status followed mid-week when an Exeter XV faced a team representing the University College of the South West Past & Present (31-3). Of more certain status but in less pleasant conditions was the next game with Devonport Services at the Rectory. In continuous rain on a wet and slippery pitch Exeter lost a close game (5-9).

Wet weather influenced the next two games as well. An understrength team travelled to Edgware to find their hosts’ new pitch under water. The game match was played on an adjacent pitch and by the end “players were hardly recognisable” (6-26). The following

Saturday many rugby games were cancelled but a home game against the Portland based 1st Gloucestershire Regiment went ahead. The score was said to reflect the conditions (3-0).

A strong wind and a sodden pitch were not the only handicaps for Exeter at Barnstaple. Winger R.G. Rew missed his train. A substitute was offered for the second half but a suitable pair of boots could not be found! Barnstaple was also reduced to fourteen players in the second half due to injury. Exeter was unable to cope with the conditions despite their style of play being described as “credible” (3-11).

Well beaten at Torquay Athletic, Exeter also suffered the loss of skipper Willie Brock for the remainder of the season (0-14). Two home games ended with a victory over Wellington (12-10) and an unexpected defeat by Sidmouth (3-8). The visitors won through their forwards and one of their try scorers was Eddie Munt, Exeter’s fly-half of the previous season.

For the next game Exeter was to face the Combined Colleges in the now traditional mid-week fixture. Somewhat strangely Exeter chose to play only fourteen players comprising six forwards and five three-quarters. Fielding a couple lower team players Exeter won comfortably on a County Ground that was in poor condition (11-0).

Although losing at Weston, Exeter “played remarkably well with a weak team”. Finding themselves thirteen points behind the players rallied to get within two points of their opponents before Weston had the final say (11-16). Defeat at home by Cheltenham was very disappointing. The visitors made an unpromising start by turning up with only thirteen players. One of this band had also missed his train but turned to his motor-cycle to chase the train to Bristol where he joined his comrades. Exeter found substitutes in the form of Tomkins (scrum-half) and Sellick (forward) from the “A” and “B” XV’s. Whilst Noel Morgan was temporarily off the field the visitors scored all their points (0-8).

What came next was probably even more disappointing. The mid-week game at the Royal Naval Engineering College represented the low spot of the season. Exeter could manage only a single penalty goal to match the fourteen tries and seven conversions scored by their hosts. As no Exeter newspaper appears to have reported this game and the Western Morning News report does not mention any Exeter player no record of the composition of the Exeter team can be found but it could not have been a very good one (3-56). The current equivalent score would have been 3-84.

Exeter was now in the middle of a run of seven consecutive defeats. The next stumbling block was provided by visiting Bridgwater & Albion when both teams fielded several reserves. A “gallant effort” by the Exeter forwards was not enough (0-10). The forwards went one better at home against Torquay Athletic when the pack gave its “best display of the season”. Exeter could consider themselves unlucky as the only score of the game came via a forward pass (0-5).

The visiting Newton Abbot team lost a player with a broken leg after fifteen minutes but still won even though the Exeter forwards again played well (4-6). At Sidmouth Exeter were caught cold allowing the home side to score eight points shortly after the start but was then reduced to thirteen men due to injuries either side of half time. Exeter managed only one score during this period (3-8).

The victory that broke the run of defeats hardly ranked as one of the best achievements of the season. As a prelude to the Annual Dinner a Past Players XV was easily outpaced (23-3).

Easter began with another defeat by visiting Nottingham. The visitors were well ahead when Exeter lost W. Webber, the U.C.S.W. captain who made several appearances for the Chiefs, when he had to leave the field with a cut above an eye before half time. He was replaced for the second half but Exeter was unable to make a come-back (5-22). A Nottingham player incurred the displeasure of the crowd by wildly kicking the ball at Exeter players when they were awarded a free-kick. He was warned also by the referee.

On Easter Saturday two games were staged on the County Ground. In the morning game Paignton was defeated by a team that included the veteran Stan Havill, by this time a much respected referee, who deserved "much praise for standing the pace so well". D.P. Wilcocks, who had taken over club captaincy following Willie Brock's injury, led the way by scoring two tries (12-3). In the afternoon a Rosslyn Park XV opened their account with eight points in the first quarter of an hour. It took until after half-time for Exeter to reply. Another brace of tries from Wilcocks playing his second game of the day helped the home team to victory (9-8).

A year later C.C. Hoyer-Millar produced "Fifty Years of Rosslyn Park" a history that detailed all the first team games played by the club until its anniversary. No mention is made of the game at Exeter in 1928 so it was not recognised by them as a senior fixture.

Defeats resumed for Exeter. A larger home crowd than usual gathered to watch visitors Plymouth Albion who fielded a full side that included international and county players. Exeter were soon handicapped by an injury to T.R.K. Jones that kept him off the field for most of the game and later J.C. Brock went off to hospital with a badly cut lip. With only six forwards for much of the game Exeter held their own until the last twenty minutes that saw the visitors score twenty points. "The difference between the sides was not as great as the score suggests" (16-37).

The usual end of season decline continued with a weak team being sent to Camborne (0-18) and a side containing several reserve forwards going down at Tiverton (15-16).

Not unlike many other seasons the final playing record for the senior team is difficult to reconcile with that stated in the press in an end of season results table which records Exeter as having played 38 matches of which fourteen were won and two drawn. Press reports for 41 matches can be found with nineteen victories and two draws being credited to the club.

Less contentious were the records of the two lower teams. The "A" XV won eighteen and drew two games out of a total of 34 played. Pride of place went to the "B" XV who enjoyed an unbeaten season winning twenty four games and drawing two of their programme of 26 matches.

Some sixty persons attended the Annual Dinner at Deller's Café in April at which former club player and official C.R.M. Clapp made an observation that a lot of points were lost in goal-kicking. He "did not agree to putting in a man simply for goal-kicking" then added "every man behind the scrum ought to be able to kick a goal". At the end of the evening the Exeter Rugby Football Club song was sung – now a long defunct tradition.

On the financial side, the treasurer at the A.G.M. could report a profit of £90 (£3,000) on the season, despite gate money falling off, and that half the loan for the grandstand had been paid off.

In May it was announced that a dirt track was to be laid at the County Ground thereby allowing the popular motor-cycle sport to be witnessed in Exeter. Assurance was given that the new feature would not interfere with rugby or other games.