

31st Season 1902-3

“A more satisfactory season” was the verdict at the end of 1902-3 season. Victories numbered more than defeats again but only by a margin of one. Thirteen wins were offset against twelve defeats with an incredible nine games drawn, including a run of four in a row, in a programme of 34 matches. The fixture list had a more balanced appearance with only Torquay Athletic being met on fours occasions. Three teams from Wales were again included in the programme. Crediton also reappeared on the card in games that provided two comfortable victories.

The team underwent the usual changes through the season but the form displayed from week to week was erratic. The Chiefs were backed up by the Reserves who won thirteen and drew three of their 25 games. The second string also won the Herbert Cup, a competition for junior clubs within the city, by defeating Emmanuel (20-3). Another city club, Friernhay, won the Devon Junior Cup defeating Teignmouth (4-3) at Newton Abbot.

In 1896 two brothers, Ernest and Charles, both forwards, began to appear for Exeter Chiefs. Initially their surname was given as Morgan but later the spelling was also shown as Morgon. It almost seemed to depend on which newspaper was reporting teams and matches. Ernie, the elder of the two, a robust forward, was elected captain for the season but, for some unreported reason, he did not appear in the team after Christmas. It is possible that he went to work in the Ashanti gold fields in the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Younger brother Charlie continued playing for several more seasons.

Opening with a game at Crediton before a “fair gate” which was entertained by the Town Band, Exeter won (19-0) but this encounter was not a hard enough contest before travelling to Leicester the following week. Up to half way Exeter held the “Tigers” in check despite losing half-back W. Kerswell for a time with a head injury. In the second half Exeter “went to pieces” (0-21).

The first home match was against a disorganised Exmouth side. Exeter crossed their opponents’ line thirteen times in a one-sided game (45-0). To follow Exeter could only achieve a scoreless draw at Barnstaple, in yet another rough game at the north Devon venue. The Exeter full-back Friend and a Barnstaple player were ordered off the field for fighting whilst a spectator who tried to interfere was bundled off the ground by the Barnstaple players.

One thousand spectators, “an average gate”, turned up to watch the second home match of the season from which Exeter squeezed a victory against Torquay Athletic (3-0). Travelling to Bath with only thirteen players Exeter had to find two substitute forwards. Exeter had won the previous nine encounters between the two sides but on this occasion Bath was able to avoid defeat. The game ended in a draw (0-0).

After two victories, Exeter faced Devonport Albion at home before 3,000 spectators. Prospects were not good but the result turned out to be very satisfying as the visitors won by the only score of the game – a penalty goal (0-3). Away to Plymouth the following week, the result was not so satisfying (0-6).

For the third week running Exeter faced opponents from Plymouth - the Royal Naval Engineering College. One report thought Exeter lucky to win (3-0) as their try scoring move included a forward pass. Some might have thought luck was justified. An Exeter three-quarter, Finnimore, was carried off having received a cut behind the ear. His place was taken by the captain Ernie Morgan. A substitute was allowed by the visiting captain but it came in the guise of Friend who took the field with a bandaged leg protected by a shin guard. A further injury meant that Exeter still finished the game with fourteen players.

There followed the aforementioned four successive drawn games. In the game at Tiverton (3-3), full-back Friend fielded a kick on the half-way line and, on a sodden pitch in incessant rain, raced fifty yards to score Exeter's only try. Rain and another sodden pitch spoiled the game against visitors Penygraig (3-3) in front of a small attendance. On the same day a player named Record in the Reserves was sent off for abusing the referee.

Then came what was labelled "one of the surprises of the season". Travelling to Exmouth, Exeter again demonstrated their inconsistency and possibly some complacency as well. Having won by a distance at home, Exeter took the game took easily and found themselves thirteen points behind at half-time. In the second half they did stage a comeback but had left it too late and consequently suffered defeat (11-13).

Two Christmas holiday games at home were won - against Penarth (14-6) and Old Edwardians (14-5) but the first five games in the New Year furnished only one win, that at home to Newton (6-3). In this game Arthur Brock was recorded as being the new captain.

Away at Torquay Athletic five last minute substitutes had to be found including Record of the Reserves who had been sent off earlier in the season. Exeter then resumed winning ways again but only at the expense of Crediton (41-3). Described as "fast and farcical" the game saw three Exeter players returning from injury. The visitors' plight was made worse when a player was ordered off for striking an opponent. Then Sprague (who later appeared occasionally in games for Exeter) went off injured with a head injury. Exeter also finished with a depleted team when Philip Nicholas left the field with a knee injury.

The kick-off for the game at home against Bath was delayed by an hour because the visitors "lost a train". Exeter recovered their winning ways against the team from Somerset by a solitary try (3-0).

Five consecutive matches against Devon opposition demonstrated Exeter's standing within the county. Only a draw at home against Barnstaple (5-5) could be off-set against four defeats. In this game playing at full-back for Exeter was a former Exeter United soccer player names Ashford (no relation to Lee and William).

A defeat at Torquay Athletic (0-26) was described as "a miserable display". At The Rectory 5,000 spectators saw their team, Devonport Albion, score eight tries without reply from Exeter (0-26). Just when the prospects for the rest of the season did not look good, Exeter again showed their inconsistency. If the earlier defeat by Exmouth

was regarded as the “surprise of the season” then the next match was heralded as a “Sensation at the County Ground”.

Bristol was the attraction but, possibly because of their recent run of poor form, Exeter could attract only a small number of spectators. With a far from full-strength team Exeter, against the odds, came out victorious (8-4). All the points were registered by leading forwards - tries by Brock and Kelly plus a conversion kicked by Powell.

Easter Saturday also saw an improved performance. Leicester provided the visiting opposition and Exeter still lacked first choice players through injury. Moreover, wing-three quarter Goddard went off injured and Exeter played most of the second half one man short. In fact the home team was thought unlucky not to have won as Brock, the captain, who had been taken out of the pack to replace Goddard, attempted a penalty kick at goal from the half-way line. The ball hit a post and Exeter had to settle for a draw (0-0).

The customary defeat by Old Merchant Taylors preceded a win over Pontypridd (13-3) to round off the season.

The dispute between Exeter and Devonport Albion that spilled over from the previous season continued without resolution. On instruction from the Devon R.F.U., Albion was to play an extra game at the County Ground to compensate Exeter for a game cancelled by Albion. A mid-week game was duly arranged for early April but when Exeter learned that Albion planned to send what was basically their Reserve XV, they declined to play. No extra money was forthcoming to help reduce the £32 (approx. £1,800) adverse balance at the end of the season.