

## 81<sup>st</sup> Year 1952-3

After previous seasons that had been labelled “difficult” and then “enjoyable”, 1952-3 was described as “happy” although the playing record was not as good as that of recent campaigns. The fixture list was “a powerful one” so to win half of the 40 games played with three drawn was a creditable effort by the team. Near parity was achieved in the points scored – 306 against 309. The back division was said to be “useful” whilst the pack was “useful but not brilliant”. The forwards were often outweighed and beaten in the line-outs.

Jack Harrison, in his fifth year as captain, would not have been satisfied with his team’s performance for the first seven games. “Seldom has the record been so poor” commented the Express & Echo after a solitary victory and a draw that was set against five defeats. Even so, attractive rugby was played and at this early stage it was thought that the pack was a better unit than that of the previous season,

The opening fixture, on a Thursday evening at home against Torquay Athletic, could well have ended in defeat but for a last minute tackle by full-back Alf Hunt to prevent a try by the visitors. This would have been the only score of the game (0-0). Two days later, at home to Blackheath, the Exeter backs saw a lot of the ball but their movements were smothered by their opponents (3-11). Another four days passed and a crowd of 2,000 assembled at Bristol to see the home team win comfortably (0-18)

Another tough fixture followed three days later at Gloucester. This mid-week game attracted a crowd estimated at 5,000. Exeter, although losing again, showed an improvement in their play (8-13).

The crowded September schedule gave the players only another three days to recover before Exeter faced an invitation XV raised by Bleddyn Williams, the renowned Wales and British Lions centre. The match was staged to raise funds for the Lynton and Lynmouth Relief Fund. An August storm of tropical intensity over Exmoor and its locality led to flooding that caused much devastation and the loss of 28 lives. The match raised £310 (£7,000). For the first twenty minutes of the game the Exeter team was mesmerised by the star-studded opposition that gave an object lesson in skilful handling. Exeter recovered and held their own, especially up front, during the second half (6-26).

“Back to the mundane” was the Express & Echo’s view of the following home game against St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. Roy Grace, an outside half who had joined the club from Exmouth, made his debut after being injured in the pre-season trial, but the new half back pairing was “not a happy unit” contributing to “an uninteresting game”. Nevertheless the first victory of the season was gained (9-0).

The next week, still at home, Exeter fell to another defeat, this time against Devonport Services. The cause was said to be Exeter’s desire to play attractive football and keep the game open that led to the downfall. The margin was a single conversion (8-10).

After a week off due to Devon playing Gloucestershire on the County Ground, Exeter travelled to Torquay Athletic. Following a poor showing two weeks previously, the partnership of Roy Pike and Roy Grace was described as “formidable”. This led to an all-round improvement in the play of team (19-6).

Despite the improvement another defeat followed. At Barnstaple on the day of a Devon county game, Exeter introduced some younger players, two of whom were injured during the course of play (3-5). Recovery was not too long in coming and Exeter began an unbeaten sequence that led up to Christmas. Two home games provided wins, firstly against Paignton (5-0) and then a mid-week meeting with the Royal Marines (14-8).

A visit to St. Ives saw the two teams meet at Camborne as the new St. Ives pitch was not yet ready to stage the game (12-0). Injuries were now mounting for the club but Exeter fielded a team good enough to defeat Weston super Mare in a grim battle in the mud on the County Ground (3-0).

One of the injured players was Alf Hunt who had broken his nose but such was his loyalty that, for the next match, he cycled from his place of work in Ilminster to Taunton to join the team as a spectator on its journey to Bath. Exeter came near to the first defeat by Bath since November 1938. Bath went ahead with a try but Exeter drew level through a well taken penalty from W.E. (Bill) Jones who at 17½ years of age was later to keep Alf Hunt out of the team. Exeter's covering was of a high order and the Bath backs were unable to penetrate again (3-3).

Another blank Saturday was the outcome of a pitch inspection before a game against St. Luke's College. A sheet had been covering the waterlogged County Ground pitch and although it was thought the pitch to be just about playable, in view of a forthcoming England trial match at Exeter it was decided to rearrange the fixture between the two locally based teams.

Home victories against Devon opposition, Teignmouth (18-11) and Exmouth (17-5) preceded the International trial held on the County Ground on the Saturday before Christmas. The pitch must have recovered from its previous doubtful state as two further matches had by then been played on what would have been a muddy surface. As it turned out the pitch was not the problem - it was the weather which was said to have been terrible.

Boxing Day brought disappointment when Exmouth, on their own ground, turned the tables on Exeter who had won two weeks previously. On "a bumpy pitch" at Cranford, the home team put up a magnificent defence but showed little inclination to handle the ball. One chance came their way - a penalty goal attempt - and it was taken (0-3).

The next day Exeter managed to reverse the previous score line in defeating Old Blues on a swampy County Ground where the players became anonymous in their mud stained kit. The visitors gained a lot of possession but were kept at bay by Roy Pike's tactical kicking. It was a cross-kick from him that led to the only score of the game, a try by winger John Stark after 25 minutes. The Exeter wing-forward A.E.G. (Alan) Hitchman, an Old Blue, played "a storming game" (3-0).

A narrow victory at Weston super Mare saw in the New Year (5-3) but a trip to the capital to play London Hospital brought a disappointing two point defeat. The club programme was to comment "Exeter ... still cannot understand why they lost to London Hospital ... after attacking for 80 per cent of the game. We still seem most unlucky with our goal kicks" (9-11). The problem with place kicking was again evident in a home success over Barnstaple when only one of five tries was converted (17-5).

Another home win followed - a defeat of Plymouth Albion (17-5) - before Exeter suffered a surprise home defeat by Old Millhillians (3-11). A second successive defeat came at Clifton where the visitors found themselves nineteen points down. A come-back was staged but it was not enough (11-19).

Playing host to Wasps it was Exeter's turn to register an unexpected win. In what the press labelled "Tilt's Match". The Hele's School XV captain, 18 year old J.G. Tilt, was selected to play centre alongside his school rugby master Jack Harrison. It was Tilt who made the break to send Johnny Stark in for a try. The conversion failed but it was pointed out that the kicker, Tony Lee, was married on the morning of the match (6-0).

Two more home victories came next, against Redruth (13-0) and Guy's Hospital (13-6). For a mid-week charity fixture Exeter combined with St. Luke's College to field a team to face a Devon XV in aid of the East Coast Flood Disaster that had occurred a few weeks earlier. A crowd of 1,500 attended the game that had to be cut short by seven minutes due to fog. At that point the Combined XV led by nine points to the county team's eight.

March began with another surprise defeat. The surprise was not so much that Exeter lost at Plymouth Albion but the margin of defeat (3-17). Seven days later Exeter returned to Plymouth to face

Devonport Services where they exacted revenge for an early season defeat (9-8). Travelling further afield to Aberavon, Exeter lost after Tilt and Grace were both injured during the game (0-9).

For the rearranged fixture with St. Luke's College, "NKS", the Express & Echo rugby reporter, was at his dramatic best. "There was nothing left on the clock except the maker's name and thirty seconds" when, with the score standing at six points each, Roy Pike cross kicked and Johnny Stark went in at the corner with 3,000 spectators roaring deliriously. A feature of this game was the tight play of Brian Homer who out hooked the legendary Bryn Meredith of Wales and Lions fame (9-6). This match was the first of seven consecutive games at home for Exeter.

At the end of March a game that could have been won was left drawn when "many penalties were missed" facing Cheltenham (0-0). The Easter programme commenced with a narrow victory over Old Cranleighans (18-16). Ten over a period of nine days four games ended in defeat though it should be noted the opponents represented some of the leading clubs in the country at the time. On Easter Monday Moseley proved to be "Too Good Behind For Exeter" according to a Birmingham press report. Exeter did gain a lot of possession but could not break the defence of the visitors. Moseley opened the scoring with a penalty before Brian Homer touched down after the ball had been kicked over the visitor's line. A second half try won the game for Moseley (3-6). The margins of defeat were slightly wider in the next three matches against Leicester (5-13), Ebbw Vale (3-9) and Newport (9-19). This last game saw an attendance of 2,500 at the County Ground.

Then came Exeter's turn to go on tour – the regular two match trip to Cornwall. On a Friday evening Penzance & Newlyn was defeated (11-8) but the following day saw Redruth victorious (3-17).

The season was "brought to a fine end" with the defeat of Bridgend at the County Ground (8-3).

Disappointment was expressed at the attendance in July at the Supporters' Club Annual General Meeting. Here it was reported that programme sales had fallen from nearly 11,000 to about 8,500. A week later at the Exeter Football Club A.G.M. it was evident that these figures came as a result of a fall in gates at ordinary club matches. The International trial in December brought in £100 (£2,300) and the bank balance stood at £160 (£3,700). The game in aid of the Lynton/Lynmouth disaster fund and the match for the East Coast Disaster Flood Relief fund raised (£310 (over £7,000).

Club President W.A. Ashford declared his intention to stand down as he was approaching 82 years of age. This was to be a somewhat prophetic announcement.