

51st Year 1922-3

By the time of the end of season Annual General meeting in June it could be reported that the club had experienced its most successful season since the cessation of hostilities in 1918. Slowly the club was regaining its position among western clubs.

The press commented that at times the club “appeared to have got together a team as good as any in the county but then they would lose to ordinary sides”. Inconsistency was still a bane of the club. One reason for this was given as irregularity of availability of some senior players particularly at centre-three-quarter. For the last four games of the season weak teams were fielded and away match team selection proved once more to be a headache for the secretary. However examples were set by the captain Willie Brock who missed very few games and the vice-captain Colin Hoare who missed only one.

Another reason given for erratic performance was the fact that Exeter was seen as a “sporting” team keen to open up the game, sometimes to its own detriment. Nor did the club resort to the over robust play displayed by other teams in the county. Before the season was much more than two months old the Devon R.F.U. had cause to admonish the Newton Abbot club for “rough play”. Teignmouth broke off fixtures with Brixham for a similar reason. The recently revived Exeter Rugby Supporters Club urged local sides to “keep it clean” in line with the amateur ethos of the time. The press could comment “Exeter has secured a name throughout the county – and even beyond Devon confines – for their clean and sportsmanlike qualities”.

The senior team played a total of 44 games of which 16 were won and five drawn illustrating the inconsistency of the side. Only fifteen victories can be found from press reports. The points tally was 327 against 475 which was said to demonstrate the open nature of most games. The “A” team often suffered from players being called up to the first team. Of 29 games played ten were won and four drawn. The reconstituted Exeter Oaks club provided substitutes for the Exeter second string on occasions.

Captaining the first team was Willie Brock, son of a former player, also called Willie, and nephew of Arthur Brock a former club captain all of the local firm W. Brock & Co. The new leader was steadfast member of the pack who also undertook the duties of goal kicker.

After the usual practice matches Exeter took a fairly strong team to play what was described as “an exhibition game” at Cullompton. The victory by the visitors appears to have been included in the season total of 44 games played (34-3). For what was described as the opening fixture Exeter travelled to meet Bridgwater & Albion without seven first choice players. Exeter’s line was crossed no fewer than eight times in a disappointing defeat (0-28).

Travelling to Barnstaple where the local club had been revived Exeter was deemed to have been lucky in avoiding defeat as onlookers thought the home side should have been awarded a penalty try (0-0). Victory at home against the Royal Naval Engineering College on a wet pitch was welcomed but the College was no longer the force it had been in pre-war days (6-3).

Three defeats came next. A mid-week game at Tiverton refereed by T.S. Kelly (3-6) was followed by a visit from Sidmouth (0-9). Next Exeter was “hardly expected to defeat

Brixham on their own ground". The winners of the Devon Cup from the previous season proved the observers right by scoring six tries (0-20).

A brief revival demonstrated the form of which Exeter was capable with two home victories. Colin Hoare had an outstanding games scoring two tries while scrum half Alf Woodrow also played brilliantly in a defeat of Weston (13-0). Hoare scored again against Wellington when the team appeared to show growing confidence in their own ability (14-6).

In typical Exeter fashion the renewed confidence did not last as four consecutive defeats caused disappointment. At Torquay Athletic the Exeter forwards struggled to gain possession (13-32). At Plymouth Albion the disappointment would have been even greater. On this day seven Albion players were representing Devon in a county game against Gloucestershire. Exeter was not at full strength and one local newspaper thought the team had done well to lose by 14 points whilst a Plymouth newspaper was probably nearer the truth by stating that Exeter was "trounced" (8-22).

At home in a Devon Senior Cup match against Newton Abbot, Exeter was said not to have been disgraced as luck seemed to go the way of the visitors (3-14). It was a similar story against Exmouth on the following Saturday (3-16). For the second time this season the Supporters Club produced a match programme all of which were snapped up long before kick-off.

Respite came with a victory over Blundell's when open play was reflected in the score line (27-18) but it was recognised that the school did not present "a test of physical strength like other Devon teams". Four days later what must have been a weak team was sent to play the Royal Naval Engineering College another team that did not display too many physical attributes. The College in this instance simply ran away with the game (0-33).

December then began with a home win against Barnstaple in a fast game where the score reflected Exeter's superiority (17-8). The next game at Paignton was lost. Exeter again provided "sporting opposition" but the home team was said to be "too clever" for the visitors (0-11). The up and down nature of Exeter's fortunes continued when missing a few first choice players the team managed to draw with Torquay Athletic, each side scoring three tries (9-9).

Although losing the first of the Christmas period games against Bridgwater & Albion in "another bright open game" home supporters were said to be "enjoying the fare being offered" (3-9). Devon Nomads, a scratch XV, did not provide the strength of opposition required even for a Boxing Day fixture (23-0). The next day saw Cardiff Scottish provide a stiffer test. Down by six points at half-time Exeter rallied to score eleven unanswered points (11-6).

The last Saturday of 1922 saw Exeter in Cornwall playing Redruth where the tables were turned. Leading at half-time through a Colin Hoare try, Exeter could not hold out and lost (3-6). The New Year began with a draw. Plymouth Albion came to the County Ground missing seven players who were playing for Devon. Only one Exeter player, A.W. Knight, was similarly engaged. The visitors were lucky to escape defeat (6-6).

A second round Devon Cup match at Exmouth was lost (0-16) with Exeter having to field a makeshift half-back pairing and suffering the loss of Knight for most of the second half. Two

days later Exeter on their own ground were set to face even tougher opposition in the guise of an unbeaten Newport team. With only two guest players in their midst Exeter gave the Welsh visitors their hardest game of the season to date. A record crowd of 4,000 spectators witnessed the “most invigorating and thrilling game since the war”. Although Exeter lost in the end the margin was just a single point and they scored two tries to nil, Newport registering a dropped goal and a penalty goal (6-7).

Travelling to Devonport with only thirteen players Exeter “contrived an unexpected victory” against Devonport Services. Two substitutes were enlisted but the visitors found themselves six points down at half time. Exeter rallied to score tries by V.G. Troulan and the veteran Stan Havill who also kicked two conversions (10-9). It must be recorded that on this same day Devonport Services were supplying three players to the England team and Devonport Services other XV was away beating Coventry.

A weak Exeter team did not last the pace at Weston whose forwards were on top for most of the game whilst the Exeter backs missed a number of opportunities to score (0-15). A “regrettable incident” took place near the end of the game when a player from each side was sent off. One of the home forwards was dismissed for striking an opponent and then Veale of Exeter was sent off for retaliating – “a novel experience for an Exeter player”.

The match programme for the next home game asked the question “Can we extend Exmouth?” The answer was a definite “No”. Exmouth scored eleven points in each half to gain a comfortable victory (0-22). A win over Teignmouth (6-3) preceded three successive defeats. Against Newton Abbot the Exeter forwards were criticised for trying to smother the home half backs instead of applying their weight in the scrums (0-22). This pattern continues at Wellington (0-17). No better was the performance against Paignton at the County Ground. Despite fielding a makeshift back line with Roach, a forward at centre, Exeter was on top for much of the first half and missed opportunities cost them dear (3-10). W.G. Roach was selected for Devon during the season but he later moved to London where he played for Blackheath. He was unfortunate in breaking his leg while representing his club at Cardiff during his first season with them.

Three victories on the run were then recorded, all admittedly against lesser opposition. Bristol Saracens (13-0), Combined Colleges (23-0) and Devonport Services (11-3) went down at the County Ground. The Services game took place on a day when the Devonport club had supplied two players to the England team that beat Scotland and the “other” Devonport Services team was at home playing against Swansea.

Swansea, on tour, then visited the County Ground on the following Monday where the team displayed “superior football” to Exeter who had two backs, Douglas and Lammert, incapacitated for much of the game (3-20).

Exeter was similarly handicapped at Sidmouth. Knight was injured during the first half and another member of the pack, George Liddle, was sent off in the second half for saying “You’re wrong ref”.

On the last day of March Brixham came to Exeter where the home team produced one of their better performances (13-8). Star of the show was Reginald Carah who scored two of the finest tries seen at the County Ground during the season. Carah, a member of the teaching staff at the Mint School, was unfortunately very short-sighted and was not always able to

judge the flight of the ball accurately. Otherwise, it is said, he would have featured as one of the best three-quarters in the west of England. He was to die at the early age of 37 in 1930 following an operation, leaving a widow and two young sons.

Easter visitors were not from the highest echelons but Exeter managed only to draw with both Morrision (3-3) and the Brigade of Guards (6-6) in front of only moderate crowds. The last home game of the season ended in disappointment as Exeter scored the game's only try that could not match the two penalty goals and one dropped goal registered by Taunton (3-10). A mid-week victory at Teignmouth brought little consolation (6-3).

The season was coming to a weary end. The smallest gate of the season at Exmouth was treated to a game that was "of such a character as to cause no regret that the winter game had come to a close". "A spiritless scramble from start to finish" ended in victory for the home team (0-13) and Exeter still had one more game to play.

At Taunton Exeter had the better of the first half and led by a Willie Brock try at the interval. Thereafter Taunton ran up eleven points in fifteen minutes and scored a final goal to overhaul their visitors with "both teams suffering from the effects of a long season" (3-16).

This season the initial stage of the Devon Cup competition was run as a league based on normal club fixtures. Exeter rivalled Barnstaple for bottom place. With only two wins and two draws in thirteen games Exeter finished above their north Devon rivals and did not qualify for the knock-out stages of the competition.

Financially the accounts proved satisfactory with an end of season balance in hand of £129 6s 4d (nearly £3,000). Expenditure in the future was still an issue. Additional accommodation at the County Ground was provided by placing seats on the cycle track that ran round the playing area. A more permanent solution was required. In addition the President commented on the slovenly appearance of the Exeter team wearing non matching jerseys, knickers and stockings. Clearly new kit was required.

The supporters club provided a great boost to the club by running various fund raising events, donating £40 (£850) to the senior club, producing match programmes and generally supporting rugby in the city. One innovation was selling draw tickets with slogan "Win Your Christmas Dinner For 3d" which would approximate to 27p.