

77th Year 1948-9

“How would the young players perform?” was the question posed by the press and by supporters before the season got under way. Leading players Ford, Madge and Brown had already retired through illness and injury, then it was learned that Norman Humphries (centre), Peter Plumpton (a forward) and Idris Roberts (winger) were either to retire or move away from the district. All these players were of county standard or higher.

By the end of the season it was apparent that the younger players coming into the team had performed very well, probably better than expected. Out of a programme of 39 games played only eight were lost and two were drawn with the team scoring well over twice the number of points registered by the opposition.

Fly-half cum centre, Jack Harrison, was elected captain for the first time. His deputy, and leader of the forwards, was hooker Bill Sanders who started his career with Plymouth Albion before joining the Exeter Police Force. Already an England trialist when joining the Exeter club, in this season he came even closer to gaining International honours when selected as a travelling reserve.

A practice at the end of August attracted some fifty players and a trial game the following week, involving forty of that number, took place with the captain watching from the stand rather than participating in a game in which the “Probables” comfortably beat the “Possibles”.

What, in effect, was another practice game took place at Kingsbridge where the local club had invited Exeter to take part in a mid-week match to celebrate the re-opening of the Memorial Ground after war-time use. This was not regarded as an official fixture by Exeter (13-6).

For the first Saturday game Exeter was scheduled to face Exmouth but the “Cockles” sportingly agreed to swap fixtures to allow Exeter to play Blackheath at the County Ground. This was the first meeting between the two clubs that had a strong link in the person of H.L.G. Hughes, a former captain of Exeter and current President of Blackheath, who was present at the game. Commenting on the game for The Sunday Times the former England scrum-half, said of Jack Harrison that Exeter was “fortunate to have such a player as captain in the key position he occupies”. Exeter deservedly won (12-8).

A mid-week game at Sidmouth displayed “more enthusiasm than rucker” (6-3). A late withdrawal from the Exeter team was Bill Sanders who had been up all night in a hunt for a prison escapee. The first defeat of the season came at home when facing Devonport Services. Despite missing three regulars Exeter played a better combined game but Services won through “individual brilliance”. Exeter tired noticeably in the second half (5-13). A second home defeat in a row followed and again it was individual opportunism that won the game for Torquay Athletic. “Incoherent midfield mêlées” made for a disappointing game. The visitors scored an interception try and late in the game scored a dropped goal to win the game. The International Rugby Board had reduced the value of the dropped goal from four to three points but three points was enough for Torquay (8-11).

Making up lost ground Exeter then won the five games. A Thursday evening game at home to Barnstaple (14-3) came two days before a visit to Taunton where the home pack was mastered for the first time in the season. It was only when the Exeter forwards tired in the second half that the home team came into its own but by then winger Gerry Brown had scored “a trio of tremendous tries” (13-0). Back at home the Exeter forwards were the key to success over Old Blues (17-0) whilst the plucky Blundell’s XV was undone by an “unbalance of weight and experience” (26-0).

In contrast to the previous game, Exeter played out “a scrappy uneventful game” against Old Paulines on the first visit to Thames Ditton since 1938. Just as the game looked like ending pointless, Roy Pike made a break that led to a try by Gerry Brown (3-0).

The next home match could also have been decided at the last gasp but this time Exeter lost to a Royal Marines Representative XV. Centre Yendell, in possession some three yards from the line, fumbled the ball and knock-on so the chance was lost. Exeter had been slow and uncertain during the game and the visitors deserved to win (6-10). Still at home, Exeter fielded P. Davey from Blundell’s School at hooker against London Hospital and won comfortably (16-0).

October ended with a visit from Weston super Mare who managed to take the lead three times yet lose. All the scoring was contained within a twenty minute period in the first half. The Weston hooker had missed his train and so Exeter gained most of the possession from set scrums (13-9).

November began with an unexpectedly heavy defeat of Royal Naval Engineering College at Keyham. The College defence crumbled in the second period when Exeter scored 31 points. Jimmy Piggot, a medical man from Belfast and newly selected by Devon, scored three of the nine tries registered (39-5). A county match at Exeter meant there was no fixture the following week. Exeter resumed with another victory away from home, this time at Barnstaple (13-8).

Before the start of the next home game a minute’s silence was observed on the opening of a new wing to the Memorial Clubhouse. Young blood featured in the game against Somerset Police showing encouraging promise in a drawn game (8-8). Remaining at home Teignmouth was defeated (9-3). A third home game in a row resulted in a draw with Exeter College, Oxford. This last game was by wretched weather conditions (3-3).

Stubborn defence was the order of the Day at the Recreation Ground resulting in a single score. This went to Torquay Athletic who thereby achieved a double victory over Exeter in the season (0-3).

The Boxing Day encounter at Exmouth has a unique place in Exeter’s rugby folk law. “The Battle of the Exe” attracted a record crowd to the Cranford ground. After a first half when play had become over keen, the referee, Mr. H.G. Webber of Exeter, called the two teams together at the interval and had the players singing “O Come All Ye Faithfull”. “Thus was the Christmas spirit restored in a game which was beginning to become too intense” wrote the Express & Echo correspondent. Early in the game the Exmouth forwards were “more energetic and played with tremendous enthusiasm” whilst in the second period the Exeter backs “shone in many fines moves” (6-0).

New Year’s Day at Weston saw the game well under way when a storm, backed by gale force winds, broke over the ground. The home team was leading by three points to nil when the referee abandoned the game with ten minutes still to play.

The New Year continued with two defeats by Welsh opposition. At Bridgend, despite 80% possession from the scrums won by hooker Jack Hemsley, Exeter contrived to lose the game. Exeter was handicapped by an injury to full back Norman who hobbled through the game after ten minutes and was unable to kick to touch (0-12). Norman’s place at full back for the next game at home was 18 year old T.M. Allen, a pupil at Hele’s School. With the Harrison brothers once more in opposition in this fixture at stand-off, London Welsh won by a conversion. “London Welsh just about deserve their win” was the verdict of D.R. Gent of The Sunday Times. All the scoring was completed by half time (8-11).

Resting on the day of the game against Bridgend was hooker and vice-captain Bill Sanders who then, on the day of the London Welsh game, travelled at Cardiff as a reserve for England. In early February he was again selected to be travelling reserve, this time for the International against Ireland in Dublin. He declined the offer and was not to come any closer to being capped by his country.

Missing eight regular players for a variety of reasons, Devonport Services came to the County ground and suffered the consequences. Incessant Exeter attacks enabled wingers Gerry Brown and Jimmy Piggot to touch down five of the six tries scored (30-6). It was next the turn of Plymouth Albion to visit Exeter but the game had to be postponed due to fog encompassing the ground shortly before kick-off. Those who had paid for tickets could not have their money refunded due to tax complications but were given tickets for future game. Opposition from Plymouth for the third week running was provided by Royal Naval Engineering College when the County Ground spectators witnessed another one sided game, Despite Jack Harrison and Henry Retter swapping positions, Exeter still missed many chances (21-0).

Receiving a visit from St. Mary's Hospital, Exeter again won by a distance (16-3) but a visit to Gloucester was cancelled by the home team because of county calls and injuries.

Members of the travelling Redruth Supporters Club were entertained by their Exeter counterparts in return for hospitality enjoyed in Cornwall. Redruth may have enjoyed the off field fare better than that which took place on the field (20-3).

March began with a return to Plymouth to face Albion. The two teams were again dogged by bad weather with heavy rain, numbing cold and a quagmire of a pitch. It was agreed to play only thirty minutes each way. The visitors took one of their few chances half way through the first period but "on a dry day Exeter would have scored 30 points" (3-0).

At home Exeter took a long time to settle down due to the activities of Old Cranleighans' wing forwards but in a storming finish three late tries were added to the score (21-6). Following this game the question now being asked was "Is the present Exeter XV as good as the first post-war side which lifted the club to the heights? There are some who even go so far as to say it is better". The home match that followed, against Bridgend, might have caused some disappointment (0-6).

To replace the fog bound fixture at the end of January Plymouth Albion sent a team to play on a Thursday evening and with a much changed team took the lead. Jimmy Piggot was switched to play centre three-quarter and, despite having "to play with a plastic dressing over his face injury", "the doctor had as gay a frolic as he had on the wing, selling dummies at black market prices" (8-3). This was the first win of nine victories out of the ten matches that ended the season.

In front of a crowd of 3,000 at the Recreation Ground, Bath won only two scrums against an in form Bill Sanders. "Bath Suffering Lack of Form" explained a local newspaper. They also suffered lack of possession (11-5). After the last home game in March a headline summed up the outcome as "Exeter Wear Down Exmouth" in an evening encounter. Exeter proved to be livelier in the second half when all the scoring to place (9-6).

The sole defeat in the last ten matches came at Bristol on the first Saturday of April. The home team fielded five reserves in the back division yet proved too good for Exeter who it was said was unlucky not to score (0-11).

Another two match tour to Cornwall proved successful once more. On a Friday evening Exeter were worthy winners against Penzance & Newlyn. Yendell was reported as having a "stupendous game" scoring two tries in the centre. Arnold Pascoe of the University College of the South-West kicked two conversions (13-6). The game at Redruth the following day was harder but with Yendell scoring another try, Exeter celebrated another victory (13-3).

Easter started with an easy win over a Devon Wanderers side (26-5) and on the Monday Moseley went down by over ten points (16-5). The following day Exeter, at home, exacted revenge on Bridgend. The press offered congratulations to John Roach, a 4th choice hooker, who gained little of

the ball but nonetheless his side won! (14-9). The last game, at home to Paignton, proved to be an anti-climax but it “set seal on an exceptionally fine season” (23-0).

Despite encouraging comments being made during the season about young blood being introduced to the senior team, at the July Annual General Meeting the newly re-elected captain, Jack Harrison, pointed out that no more than two players in the side were under the age of 25. With National Service and delays in completing education, he urged that the focus for the next two seasons should be on younger players. The Colts XV had encountered some difficult fixtures and this team should be strengthened.

The Treasurer reported a balance in hand of £1,090 (£25,000) and it was recorded that the Supporters’ Club had provided a scoreboard at the County ground.

During the course of the season there was a proposal at a Devon R.F.U. meeting to reinstate the Devon Senior Cup. Exeter secretary Tom Roebuck stated “The Exeter club is dead against competitive football and in my opinion the county would be poorer for it. Rugby is not played for the points to be gained, but for what the players get out of it and for the enjoyment of spectators”.