

79th Year 1950-1

Described as “A difficult but memorable season”, Exeter achieved a playing record just above par with wins topping defeats by four in 43 matches played. Remarkably as many as nine games were left drawn, “not all of which were attributable to muddy grounds”. The major difficulty came “because of the continual efforts to find a workable combination”. It was a memorable season because the club was one of only two sides to beat Newport and for the visit of Oxford University who helped raise £313 for the Cathedral restoration fund. The club undertook a venturesome policy that emphatically placed the emphasis on youth.

Blackheath came to kick-off the new season. According to Dai Gent, reporting for *The Sunday Times*, it looked like the first game of the season but “for all that there was a lot that was really pleasant to watch”. There was effort in Exeter’s play but it was “all rather wild and lacking in direction”. Of the Exeter forwards he said that they “have the physique if not the stamina or the skill”. *The Express & Echo* summed matters up more succinctly. “Exeter need to train and find a goal kicker” (3-13).

Selecting the same XV for a mid-week game at Sidmouth, Exeter would not have been happy with a narrow last gasp win (5-3). Better performances followed. At Taunton Exeter “lasted better” and after crossing on level terms the team went on to outscore the opposition (11-6). At home the margin of victory over Torquay Athletic was slightly better (13-5).

Before the month of September was out, a mid-week game gave an indication of the outcome of the season as a whole. Exmouth won at the County Ground for the first time since December 1937. Exeter could not cope with the kick and rush tactics of the visitors (6-8). Then on the last day of the month Exeter, still at home, bounced back with a defeat of Cheltenham, giving “a lively display of orthodox passing” (8-3).

In contrast the third home fixture in a row produced a game “totally devoid of glory or good rugby”. Despite twice taking the lead Exeter was defeated by Devonport Services. After a poor first session “the standard of play dropped even lower in the second half with a lot of touch kicking”. With seconds to go Eric Chave narrowly missed with a 45 yard penalty attempt (6-9). Yet another home game produced a second defeat in a row. On a day when Devon was playing, Exeter went down to Old Blues (11-16). It was after this game that Bill Sanders threatened to make a comeback as he was “tired of seeing his club toil”.

A Wednesday match against a Royal Marines Representative XV saw Exeter “back in top form” but, in truth, the opposition was weaker than it had been in previous meetings due, in part, to some of their number now serving in the Korean War (36-3).

A trip to Kingsholm produced a predictable defeat but the difference in the score line “did not quite do justice to the stout defence offered by Exeter”. Nonetheless Gloucester came out on top (0-14). On the road again Exeter won at the Recreation Ground, with Bath just failing to draw level with a missed conversion ten minutes from the end (14-12).

Without scrum-half Roy Pike, who was guesting for Torquay Athletic at the request of the Devon selectors, Exeter managed only to draw at Keyham against Royal Naval Engineering College. Both sides “played with wonderful spirit, never letting up” yet only one try, by Gerry Brown, was registered. All the other scoring came from penalty goals, the game ending in a draw (9-9).

After a blank Saturday due to a county game at Exeter, two more drawn games were played. Restored to a Saturday fixture, St. Luke’s College was met in an official fixture (3-3). At home to Teignmouth, when “the play was somewhat rough”, full-back Alfie Hunt managed to kick the ball dead in the closing minutes to save the game (0-0).

At the beginning of December Exeter travelled to meet Barnstaple who had just beaten Plymouth Albion. Even though “the pitch resembled a ploughed field” the two teams produced many bright handling movements with Barnstaple taking the honours (3-6).

When Exeter entertained Exeter College Oxford, the team to settle for a low scoring draw. The Express & Echo asked why the team had not scored twenty points (6-6). The following week a scheduled game at Torquay was cancelled because of adverse weather conditions. Christmas did not produce any encouraging fare. A game at Bristol was lost (3-11) and the Boxing Day meeting with Exmouth remained scoreless (0-0). Notable for playing two good games in these matches was one D.C. (Dick) Manley who was to feature brightly for Exeter in future seasons.

The year ended with a cancelled game against Weston super Mare. Two unexpected victories, both at home, kick-started the second half of the season’s campaign. The first was against Bridgend (6-3) to be followed by a match versus London Hospital (11-6). The Exeter team in these matches was said to be the youngest for many years. One of their number was A.S.E. (Tony) Lee, an excellent forward in the line-out and thought by some to be the best goal-kicker in the club. A future captain, he was later to become one of the club’s leading administrators for many years.

A further five successive victories justified the policy of selecting younger players. At the Rectory, Devonport Services became the first victim (6-0). This was followed by a home win over Plymouth Albion. In the latter game, six former members of the Colts fifteen were included in the Exeter line-up (11-0). Visiting for the first time since February 1927, London University suffered a similar fate to the defeat of initial visit (8-0). Another London visitor, Old Millhillians, was defeated more comfortably (25-0) as was Barnstaple a week later at the County Ground (18-3)

The tide turned when the team travelled to London to face Old Paulines in a fixture with a morning kick-off that would allow the teams to witness the International match at Twickenham where England lost to France. Exeter fielded a full strength fifteen but succumbed to three penalty goals kicked by their opponents (8-9). At Beacon Park defeat was again the result of a game against Plymouth Albion. Injuries meant that Colin Paul made a return to the team after announcing his retirement the previous November (0-5).

Wednesday 7th of March marked a special event in the club calendar. This was the day on which Oxford University had agreed to come and play a match to aid the fund for the restoration of Exeter Cathedral that had received considerable damage during German Baedeker raids in 1942. On the morning of the game Tony Lee had to withdraw as he was running a temperature of 102 degrees. His absence proved costly as three relatively easy kicks at goal were missed. The Exeter team included the veteran Colin Paul who gave yet another virile display. The kick-off was undertaken by The Dean of Exeter, (The Very Reverend A. Ross Wallace) whose hefty effort of over 30 yards received a big cheer from the 4,000 spectators. Exeter, playing in white to avoid a clash with the visitors’ traditional dark blue shirts, could not quite match the combined efforts of the visitors (0-6).

Post-match festivities took place at the Royal Clarence Hotel in the form of a dinner during which Jack Coombes presented a cheque for £250 (£6,000) as a first instalment from the club’s fund raising activities. In response the Dean announced that, in recognition of their generosity, the club would be immortalised by an effigy of one of the players in the new St. James’ Chapel. The identity of the player depicted on the corbel still remains a secret.

Exeter thenceforth remained unbeaten until the third game of the Easter week-end. St. Bartholomew’s Hospital went away defeated (14-0) before the club undertook its week-end tour to Cornwall. Two drawn games with an identical score-line was the outcome. The first game on the Saturday was against Redruth (3-3) whilst on the Monday the opposition was provided by Penzance & Newlyn (3-3). In this latter game, Alfred Heard received a knee injury and limped through three-quarters of the game.

Back at home Exeter accounted for Old Cranleighans on their Easter tour (6-0) before holding Coventry to a draw. The Midlands looked likely to score thirty points before rain at the interval hampered their efforts and Exeter made up an eight point deficit (8-8). The third Easter game did not end so well, Leicester being victorious in a Tuesday game (0-5). Jack Harrison broke a hand in this match.

Defeat at Clifton was said to be “a shock to those who regard Clifton as the Heavitree of Bristol” (0-3). An away victory at Paignton followed (9-0)).

“Seldom have Exeter played better than they did in beating London Irish at Blackheath in driving rain, sleet and snow and a little sunshine” said the Express & Echo (11-8). However only one more win was recorded in six games played to end the season. A crowd of 1,000 at the Recreation Ground saw the 'Tics gain an unexpected victory (3-11). On the County Ground Exeter rallied too late to overtake the Wasps score, falling three points short (8-11). Mid-week visitors Aberavon also won (0-8).

A trip to Wales involved only one match, a meeting with old rivals Bridgend. The game ended scoreless, thus bringing the number of games drawn by Exeter in the season to nine (0-0).

“'Twas a famous victory!” proclaimed the Express & Echo. Newport came to the County ground with a match record that showed only one previous defeat. Some thirty seconds after the start an Exeter attacker was tackled when not in possession of the ball. The referee, L.E.O. Evans, a former Exeter player, immediately awarded a penalty which Eric Chace turned into three points for the home side. This came at a time when many of the 4,000 crowd had not yet entered the ground. Thereafter nearly the whole game belonged to Newport but Exeter held out. Jack Davis in his book “Newport Rugby Football Club 1875-1960” makes no bones about the result. He merely says “Newport overwhelmed Exeter in general play, but simply could not reply to Exeter’s one penalty goal” (3-0).

After that win the last game of the season was always likely to be an anti-climax, and so it was. A weakened team was sent to Ebbw Vale and suffered by far the heaviest defeat of the season (0-27).

Whilst the senior team played out nine draws in 43 games the “A” drew seven games in only 22 matches, nine of which were won, Both the “B” and the Colts won just over half the games played.

“Attack must be the keyword for next season” was the message expressed by captain Jack Harrison at the Annual General Meeting. He added, “The defence was good in the games with Leicester and Oxford University but both produced dull rugby”.