

89th Year 1960-1

Consistency was paying off for Exeter with Tony Lee now in his fourth year of captaincy. The playing record was remarkably similar to that of the previous season. Again 45 matches were played but this time one less game was won and one more drawn. The number of defeats stayed at ten. The points balance improved with 640 being registered with 303 against.

The season began with two tough fixtures both of which ended in defeat, firstly at Bristol (8-23) and two days later against the touring Lansdowne, a team containing six Irish international players (6-14). Defeat did not come again until the second Saturday in December. Following an away win at Newton Abbot (5-0), further creditable victories were obtained over the touring Esher club in mid-week (9-6) and against Falmouth in Cornwall (9-0).

Three home wins against moderate local opposition followed – Devonport Services (27-0), Royal Naval College, Dartmouth (28-12) and Exmouth (20-0) - before a trip to London saw the club achieve a fine victory over Saracens (6-0). Another pair of satisfying home wins came next – Redruth (13-8) and Taunton (11-0). In the latter game, Taunton gained a fair amount of possession but the backs could not escape the attentions of the Exeter back row of Ted Bonner, Dick Manley and J.V. Rew. After a blank Saturday due to a county game being staged at the County Ground, the Royal Marines XV was entertained for a Wednesday afternoon encounter. The Marines did not field a full strength side and Exeter ran up their highest score yet registered since the points scoring system was adopted (74-6).

Buoyed by this success Exeter travelled to Clifton where the team had not won in four attempts since November 1938. The team returned home having won its eleventh victory of the season so far (14-8). Two more home wins followed - Weston super Mare (6-0) and Torquay Athletic (11-0) – before the sequence of thirteen straight victories was broken with an unexpected defeat by visitors, London Hospital (5-8).

Exeter then remained unbeaten for the remainder of the calendar year achieving wins over Barnstaple (14-0), Teignmouth and Exmouth before defeating visitors Old Blues on New Year's Eve (13-3). Of the three matches played in January all took place away from home. Two games against local rivals Torquay Athletic and Plymouth Albion were both tight affairs, Torquay Athletic being victorious (17-20) whilst the game at Plymouth ended all square (11-11). Of the latter encounter one reporter wrote "This was, indeed, a poor game between, what should, on current form, have been the best two club sides in Devon" and of the players he said "They did not even seem to be trying". Perhaps tension between the two rivals was too intense. Trailing by three points at the end of the game, Exeter was awarded a dubious try during seven extra minutes play allowed by the referee. "This was a fair result" commented another observer. Including this draw the club enjoyed a run of ten games without being beaten.

The final January fixture saw victory at Streatham (11-0). With Keith Hopper playing for Devon, Exeter then faced Penzance & Newlyn, on form the strongest club in Cornwall, Barry Carless filled the scrum-half berth. He proved to be the man of the match. A dour struggle in the mud in the first half was followed by Carless engineering open play in the second period (8-0). The draw at Weston super Mare would probably have been regarded as a good result (3-3). A Wednesday home meeting with the Royal Naval Engineering College proved to be a close run encounter (9-8) before two relatively easy encounters on the County Ground – Old Millhillians (30-0) and Guy's Hospital (19-6). Still at home Exeter found Plymouth Albion to be stiffer opposition (6-3) but a trip to The Rectory proved to be less testing with a win against Devonport Services (22-6).

The next seven games were all played at the County Ground starting with the final game of this unbeaten sequence which provided probably the most meritorious win, that against Aberavon. Exeter took what chances were on offer against the Welsh club that was on a two match tour of the West

Country. Attacking when possible, Exeter was rewarded by a hat-trick of tries from winger Tony Vinnicombe. The visitors came to life in the final twenty minutes, scoring two tries in three minutes, after which the Exeter defence held firm (16-8). The first defeat since the middle of January came at the hands of another visiting Welsh team, Bridgend (5-23).

This reverse was followed three days later by another, this time after a tense struggle with St. Luke's College in "a match that did not live up to the star billing it had received". After dominating the first half, Exeter could not produce the final thrust to score. The College went ahead in the second period but again Exeter was unable to score (0-5). March ended with a drawn game with Cheltenham (14-14) and a victory at Taunton in a match rearranged following a cancellation in January, due to a waterlogged pitch at Priory Park. Taunton was on the brink of victory being a point ahead after conceding ten early points. In the dying seconds winger Tony Vinnicombe had a clear run in but was brought down short of the line. However Barry Carless then gained possession to score the try which enabled Derek Atkins to kick the conversion that won the game (15-11).

Good Friday saw Exeter defeating traditional visitors Old Cranleighans (14-3). The next match witnessed what is likely to have been one of the main highlights of Exeter's playing season – the defeat of Moseley (16-5). The Birmingham Daily Post ran the headline, "Exeter Too Good Behind the Scrum for Moseley". "In a fast and open game" ... "Exeter's superior skill behind the scrum on a greasy ground turned the scales". A try by winger Tony Marks opened the scoring but just after the interval Moseley went ahead with the conversion of an interception try. The game swung Exeter's way again with a second Marks try to which Derek Atkins added the extra points. Centre W. Redfern, of St. Luke's College, and wing-forward J.V. Rew scored further tries for Exeter and Atkins added a second conversion (16-5).

"For the first time since the end of the last war, Leicester had to contend with a wet ground on their visit to Exeter and before the muddy pitch became virtually unplayable they had scored all their points" reported the Birmingham Daily Post. The visitors opened the scoring after fifteen minutes and soon went eleven points ahead. Just before the interval Redfern made a break that led to a try by Tony Vinnicombe. Although Exeter enjoyed much more of the ball they could add only an Atkins penalty goal to the total (6-11).

A visit to the Recreation Ground to meet Bath brought another defeat. The home team applied consistent pressure in the second half when most of the points were scored. Bath recorded the outcome as "a good win" (0-20). On this day Devon was contesting the County Championship Final against Cheshire at Blundellsands. The northern county won by five points to three. Assisting Devon were three Exeter players – scrum-half Keith Hopper, wing-forward Ted Bonner and No.8 Dick Manley.

The losing streak extended to four matches. At home against Newport, Exeter took the field with only fourteen men as late replacement hooker, Peter Nelson of Withycombe, was held up by traffic jams. Try as they might Exeter could not break through the visitors' defence whereas Newport managed to score five tries (6-17). On the week-end tour to the Duchy, Exeter was said to have thrown away chances of victory when facing Redruth (3-14). The second game of the tour, against St. Ives, involved Exeter having to make enforced late changes to the team whilst the home team included guest players. After being on the defensive for most of the half, Exeter went ahead with a breakaway try by Tony Marks to which Derek Atkins added the extra points on the stroke of half time. St. Ives maintained pressure in the second half but could only manage a penalty goal (5-3). The final three games, all against local opposition, were easier hurdles to overcome – Barnstaple (14-9), Sidmouth (21-6) and Paignton (56-10).

During the summer of 1961 back-row forward Ted Bonner, who had played 12 times for Devon, signed for the Rugby League club Hull Kingston Rovers.