

80th Year 1951-2

If the previous campaign had been officially described as difficult, then the label for 1951-2 - “a very enjoyable season” – seems to suggest an improvement in fortunes for the club. From a programme of 41 games 24 had been won against some of the best teams in the country. The pivot of success lay with the half-back combination of Jack Harrison, in his fourth season as captain, and Roy Pike, the Devon scrum-half. The team fielded two county standard wingers, Gerry Brown (who scored 112 points in the season) of Cornwall and John Stark of Devon. The need was for a good set of forwards to feed the outstanding back division. Les Davies in the second row was the most prominent forward. Possession improved when Devon hooker, Brian Homer, joined from the Tiverton club. Mention was also made of D.C. (Dick) Manley, an untiring, fast young forward, of whom “more will be heard” the report prophetically predicted.

The season opened in promising fashion with two victories on a week-end trip to Cornwall. A crowd of 3,000 at St. Ives saw their team go down (16-6). The following Monday Redruth suffered a similar fate (11-0).

A set-back came in the first home game when Taunton proved victorious (6-11). The local reporter observed that “At times Exeter heeled like men with gout”! A mid-week win at Sidmouth restored some confidence (16-9) but then it was noted that heeling was again slow in a narrow victory at Torquay Athletic (6-3). To help improve this weakness in the club’s play, Gerry Brown designed a scrummaging machine that was constructed locally at lower cost than proprietary brands.

The next two games produced victories against St. Bartholomew’s Hospital at home (26-0) and Devonport Services away (16-11) before the run was halted by Bristol’s visit to the County Ground. Exeter lacked the services of Jack Harrison and John Stark, both on county duty but Bristol had as many as ten players absent on similar duties and yet was still able to inflict defeat on the home side (8-13).

Another home defeat was to follow and this time the difference in points was wider, Saracens notching sixteen points without reply. A midweek fixture against the Royal Marines saw a return to form (31-3). Three days later, still at home, came another welcome victory, this time the opposition came from Bath. Exeter was reported to have had the game wrapped up by half time though the victory did not come through attacking play. Bath, on their own admission, also showed little inventive play to counter the home team’s penalty and dropped goal (6-0).

The following Saturday Exeter suffered another home defeat, albeit a narrow one, by the fast developing St. Luke’s College team that was soon to gain a national reputation for attacking rugby (3-6). Another midweek victory at home was gained at the expense of the Royal Naval Engineering College (25-10). Then came a Saturday of rest when Devon faced Cornwall on the County Ground.

Exeter resumed with a rearranged pack for a home game with Barnstaple but the changes were “still not the answer” though a win was the outcome (6-0). A similar result was achieved against Old Blues in what was Exeter’s eighth home game in succession (8-3).

Changes were again made for an away match at Cheltenham. Tony Lee was dropped and the dependable Les Davies recalled to take his place amongst the forwards along with John Roach who had been recalled the previous week. Visiting the spa town for this first time since 1936, Exeter attracted a crowd of 2,000 and although suffering defeat the team gained favourable national press coverage (3-9).

The next four games in December found Exeter facing Devon rivals. The outcome of these encounters would not have bolstered the team’s confidence. The first “Battle of the Exe” for the season was played on Exmouth’s waterlogged pitch in driving rain and a strong cross-wind. Exmouth

had two players appearing for Devon that day whereas Exeter had only one absent representative. Exeter was said to have fielded a weak side and under these circumstances the drawn result was almost inevitable (0-0). For the home game against Torquay Athletic, Exeter left out Eric Chave which left the team without a recognised goal-kicker. Brian Homer who had recently joined the club was selected but did not play because of injury. In the event Exeter scraped a victory (6-3). Matters did not improve with a scoreless draw at home to Teignmouth (0-0) before things took a downhill turn when Exmouth won the Boxing Day encounter on the County Ground (3-6).

Before the month was out a win at home against Weston super Mare gave hope for the New Year (12-3) and, indeed, victory at Barnstaple confirmed the improvement in form (11-0). The successful run continued against two visiting teams from London. A game against London University was described in the press as “what the customer ordered” (11-0) whilst London Hospital was defeated by a wider margin. The gap should have been even wider as Exeter, still lacking a reliable goal-kicker, converted only one of five tries scored, and that one was achieved by Roy Pike from in front of the posts. Normally a centre Norman Discombe played at stand-off in this game and gave “a capital display” (17-0).

The run of wins was interrupted when the next match, away at Plymouth Albion, had to be cancelled due to a late fall of snow. The Exeter players had assembled to set off for the game when it was learned of the enforced cancellation. Instead, the players helped at a jumble sale in Buller Hall set to raise money in aid of the Memorial Clubhouse. They then gathered at the County Ground to watch the “A” XV game.

February started with a visit by Old Paulines. Leading by a single point with a quarter of an hour to play, Exeter cut loose and registered another five tries before the final whistle. Again only one conversion kick was successful (23-5).

Another interruption came when the home match with Penzance & Newlyn was cancelled due to the death of King George VI.

The lack of a goal kicker became even more critical on a visit to Wasps where the match could have been won or at least drawn. Exeter was on top in the second half but was unable to overtake a two point deficit (3-5).

Ten consecutive home games commenced with a late win against Clifton (8-0). Alf Heard broke an ankle and missed the rest of the season whilst John Roach was recalled to the team yet again. At half-time during the home game with Plymouth Albion a collection was made by the Exeter Supporters' Club to help their neighbours in replacing their stand which had blown down in a recent gale. £22 (£500) was raised. On the field Exeter was not quite so charitable, winning by five points (18-13).

Then came a set-back in the form of a one point defeat by Devonport Services (5-6). Next up Redruth held their hosts in a drawn contest (6-6). To follow Exeter suffered defeat at the hands of two Welsh clubs – Aberavon (3-10) and Newport (3-14), the latter game being played mid-week.

A game in London against Guy's Hospital would have broken the home game sequence but a fall of snow intervened and the fixture was cancelled.

The highlight of the season came on the last day of March with a Monday evening match against a South-West XV in aid of the Cathedral Restoration Fund. The invitation South-West team was comprised of players of county standard nine of whom achieved international honours. The teams were presented to the Mayor (A.E. Brock) before kick-off. The game was described as a classic, the highlight being a dropped goal by John Kendall-Carpenter the renowned England, Cornwall and Bath wing-forward. The result was secondary to the occasion (14-18). In a period of twelve months the rugby club had raised some £513 (£12,000 approximately) for the fund.

Five days later Old Cranleighans came to the County Ground and suffered a substantial reverse (38-3). The press called into question the worth of fixtures with London Old Boys teams, the standard of which had suffered since the introduction of National Service.

Three wins over the Easter period confirmed the team's improvement over the second half of the season. On Saturday Moseley took an early lead but by half time all the scoring had been completed with Exeter having gone ahead by courtesy of two tries and a penalty goal all scored by Gerry Brown (9-5). On Easter Monday the Old Millhillians team was unable to reply to their host's tally. On a muddy ground Exeter did well with three first team debutants in the team (9-0). The following day "Exeter completed the treble by 'taming the Tigers'" as penned by a local rugby correspondent. Leicester failed to respond to the home side's score and "disappointed in every department" according to a Birmingham newspaper. Exeter gained frequent possession from the scrums through Brian Homer thereby denying their opponents any chance to make up the leeway (11-0).

A weekend tour to Wales would always be a tough task and at the end of the season Exeter could not manage to continue their winning streak. Firstly the team went down at Bridgend (6-18) before facing Aberavon in a Monday game. In this latter match Jack Harrison realised a long cherished ambition to play in his native town. A crowd of 3,500 turned up despite the pitch being in an appalling condition. The Exeter skipper would not have been disappointed by his team's performance in the circumstances (0-8).

Another tough fixture brought a further defeat when Gloucester was met at the County Ground during their end of season West Country tour (8-13). The final act of the season saw Exeter gain ample revenge for the Boxing Day defeat by Exmouth (34-3).

At the Annual General Meeting it was reported that the "A" had won 19 and drawn three out of 28 games whilst the "B" XV had won 13 and drawn one out of 26 games.

The report highlighted the fact that the club "needs a really good virile pack". Through attacking rugby over one hundred more points had been scored than in the previous season. This figure could well have been higher but for the want of a reliable goal-kicker. There was a slight financial loss on the season and it was reported that an increase in Entertainment Tax would mean higher subscriptions.