

75th Year 1946-7

Colin Paul was once again charged with the responsibility of leading the club, this time with the intention of matching or even surpassing the achievements of 1945-6. The new campaign was approached with confidence. Floodlights at the County Ground were made available for training for an hour twice a week and three practice sessions were scheduled that included a final trial on the evening of Tuesday the 3rd of September.

Four days later the season opened in earnest at Sidmouth where, despite heavy rain, a good crowd had assembled for a six o'clock kick-off. The home team scored a try after seven minutes but thereafter Exeter dominated the game. At full-back, Sid Waller was not called on to make a single tackle during the game (14-3). Seven days later there was a similar outcome to the game at Exmouth where "Exeter sparkled" and the home team was outclassed. Exeter scored twenty points in the first period before Exmouth came more into their own and Waller, on this occasion, was required to demonstrate his defensive qualities (24-3).

"Exeter Please Supporters" was the verdict after the first home game of the season that saw "Devonport Services Well Beaten". Recovering from an indifferent start, during which time Services had taken the lead with a dropped goal, Exeter began "introducing a wholesale measure of the unorthodox in attack". Faced with a sound defence the home backs nevertheless touched down six of the seven tries scored – "each a gem" (31-9).

Bristol then came to the County Ground for a mid-week evening game in front of 4,000 spectators. Exeter proved to be "speedier in attack and deadlier in defence" with Cecil Ford being "the best player on view". Exeter led at half-time by eight points to three but added only three more points, even though Bristol were rarely outside their own half. "Bristol Fail to Last Pace" ran the headline in the Western Daily Press (11-3).

Three days later a crowd of 3,000 turned up at the Recreation Ground to see Torquay Athletic defend an unbeaten record. Exeter "impressed with another delightful display" whilst Athletic was "made to look ordinary" (10-0).

A first visit to Kingsholm since December 1908 attracted a crowd of 7,000 to watch Gloucester entertain Exeter who only just managed to field the selected fifteen. In the morning Sid Waller was giving evidence in court and was allowed special permission to leave early to join the team, Cecil Ford was unable to travel with the official party. He took a train to Bristol and then a taxi to Gloucester arriving just in time to join his colleagues on the field at the kick-off. Exeter found themselves outweighed but managed to "put up a good show" according to the Gloucester Citizen. Although slightly better in set play the visitors eventually had to give way to the home team thereby suffering their first defeat of the season (6-12). Two England selectors were in attendance at the game.

Recovering well, Exeter then won the next eight matches in succession. The run started with a home game against a Barnstaple team that was accompanied by hundreds of their supporters. After falling behind 3-7 early in the second half, Exeter re-took the lead with tries from Colin Paul and Idris Roberts. According to the North Devon Journal "Territorially Barnstaple had the lion's share of the play" but defeat came because of "Barum's failure in set scrums". The Express & Exeter thought Exeter had won "Deservedly so" (11-7).

At Beacon Park both teams triumphed over the weather conditions in a game marked by resolute defences. A feature was a 35 yard dribble by centre Norman Humphries to score a try (10-5). In mid-week the Exeter pack proved too heavy for the Blundell's School eight. After five tries had been scored, the visiting forwards tired in the second half thus allowing the School more of the play. Exeter fielded only four first team regulars (15-11). As eight Exeter players had been selected for Devon on the last Saturday in October, Exeter called off its home fixture with Teignmouth.

Resuming at Taunton against Somerset Police, Exeter still had four regular three-quarters unavailable for selection. None the less the completely new back line outclassed the Police team who lost two forwards through injury in the second half. The home side took an early lead through a penalty goal but, despite second half rain, the visitors ran out comfortable winners (23-3). Another weakened team for another away match, this time at Keyham versus Royal Naval Engineering College, found Exeter hard pressed to continue its winning run. Eight players were on Devon duty whilst another four regulars were absent. Reserve centre Pierce, who had also scored a try, dropped a goal in the final minute to "put the issue beyond doubt" (15-8). Back at home again against Exmouth, Exeter's superior back division play achieved five of the six tries registered (24-11).

Appalling weather conditions at the County Ground saw "Weston beaten in mud battle". Exeter still had four injured absentees and had to make two other late changes. Weston used their feet to attack whilst Exeter tried to handle the ball. Rain fell more heavily in the second half with the result that play scarcely moved ten yards either way in the quagmire. Centre Balmer, a late replacement for Pierce who had himself been a late inclusion two matches earlier, scored a try that was converted by Waller. "Exeter had good reason to be satisfied with the result" declared a local reporter (5-0).

Queen's Park, Paignton, enjoyed its biggest gate of the season for the visit of Exeter at the end of November, but to their disappointment the home team played "a scrappy game". Exeter was able to field eight county players but they were outshone by winger Jack Carpenter who touched down three times (12-5). The Exeter team did not remain settled for long as Ford and Alan Brown were missing from the team that faced Somerset Police in the return home game. There were also last minute changes amongst the forwards. The outcome was that the team failed to get into its stride on what was still a very muddy surface. Exeter could not play its usual open game and the heavier Police forwards held sway. "Police unlucky not to win" was the opinion of a Taunton reporter (0-0).

The sequence of victories had been broken and worse was to follow. Newton Abbott had restarted activities again from scratch after eight years in abeyance. The travelling Exeter team was again missing eight regulars, seven of whom were playing for Devon. "Game marred by spoiling tactics" was the verdict on an encounter that witnessed hardly any sustained movements. The outcome was that Exeter suffered defeat by another Devon club for the first time since April 1939 (0-5). Ironically Newton Abbot would not feature in the Exeter programme for the following season as there was "no room on the fixture list".

In order to allow rugby supporters the opportunity to watch an International Trial game at Torquay, Exeter's home fixture with Torquay Athletic was rearranged to be played early in the New Year.

Boxing Day witnessed the club's first meeting with Abertillery. Exeter had little difficulty in defeating the Welsh visitors, "the only deficiency being in hooking". With Cecil Ford back in action, Exeter took an eleven point lead at half time before both teams scored once in the second half (14-3). Two days later Exeter entertained Old Blues. The large crowd was "delighted" at the play of both teams. The Exeter forwards held their own against a younger, heavier pack. Unusually no tries were scored but this was due to "brilliant defence by both sides". Ford dropped two goals whilst his partner, Dick Madge, having heard of his selection as reserve in the final England trial, suffered a blow on the nose. He said it would not prevent him accepting the invitation (8-0).

The New Year did not start well. In the rearranged mid-week contest with Torquay Athletic, on their first visit to the County Ground since 1939, the visitors proved to be superior in most phases of play. Missing the services of three leading players the home side "was outclassed everywhere". Bill Sprake, from Honiton, was recalled to deputise for Madge but his partnership with Ford was not effective and Exeter "seldom reached their customary standard of play". Leading at the half-way point through a Jack Carpenter try, the home side could not add anything more whilst the opposition went ahead with two scores (3-6). Remaining at home Exeter was able to avenge the earlier defeat by Newton Abbot

but not before the team had fallen behind by five points at half time. Forced into making late changes when Ford dropped out with a knee injury, Exeter owed much to winger Carpenter who registered another three tries, two of them within the last five minutes (9-5).

A week-end tour to Wales came at an awkward time as far as player availability was concerned. Several were ill and others were unable to travel. A party of 26 was assembled, a number that included two players from Bristol and two from St. Luke's College. The main group travelled by coach from Exeter. Waller and Carpenter joined the party on Sunday replacing, in effect, Norman Humphries and Alan Brown who had to return home on that day. On Saturday 11th January the weakened team faced Bridgend on a pitch that resembled a sea of mud. Despite the conditions there was a good deal of open play but after each side had scored a converted try in the first half there was no further scoring. The ubiquitous Colin Paul appeared at full-back and it was he who converted a brilliant try scored by Idris Roberts (5-5). Against Neath on the following Monday, Exeter suffered its biggest defeat in fifteen months. Playing in white jerseys, the visitors, in muddy conditions, soon took on a similar look to the all-black kit of the opposition. The game took place in bad weather and because the Exeter team, containing many unfamiliar names, arrived late at the ground, play was restricted to thirty minutes each way (0-15).

Back at home the following Saturday, Exeter again faced Welsh opponents. A packed stand and a thickly peopled bank welcomed London Welsh, one of the leading clubs in the country. Restored to full strength for the first time in many weeks, Exeter played with renewed confidence led by Madge and Ford at half-back. Ford kicked a dropped goal and a penalty in the first half following which no further points were added by either side (7-0).

Bad weather again set in. On the final Saturday in January a game against Devonport Services was switched to Keyham as the pitch at The Rectory was frozen. Exeter had to make a change fifteen minutes before kick-off when Ford became indisposed. His replacement went off injured just after half time. Services held an eight point lead in the first half and, according to observers, should not have lost that lead. Idris Roberts, who received the ball only three times in the match, scored twice, the final effort coming three minutes from the end of the game (11-11).

On the first of February the River Exe froze and it stayed that way for three weeks. Exeter played no games during the month. Fixtures with R.N.E.C., Old Paulines, Paignton and Weston super Mare were all cancelled.

A month's layoff appeared to do Exeter no harm at all. Resuming at the County Ground, the biggest win of the season was recorded against Old Millhillians. The visitors had three leading players absent playing for Middlesex and were unable to reply to the eight tries scored by Exeter – five by the backs and three by the forwards (36-0).

Remaining at home, Exeter faced Plymouth Albion in bright sunshine. Elsewhere in the country rugby matches were cancelled for the seventh successive week. Midway through the first half, winger Jack Carpenter sidestepped and evaded several opponents to touch down under the posts in a "scintillating solo effort". Sadly for the winger and the team, the referee had failed to notice that a touch judge had his flag up at the point where Carpenter had put a foot in touch during his first manoeuvre! The only difference between the teams at the final whistle was a Ford penalty goal. "The match was contested at great pace but was of no great merit" (3-0).

The following week at Barnstaple the score line was identical but playing conditions were in stark contrast. The game was a gruelling affair played on "a glue pot" in a high wind with a greasy ball. Ford again was the lone scorer, this time with a try after 23 minutes. The local press thought Exeter was lucky to win after the home side had spent the last ten minutes on the visitors' line without success. "What was lacking in brilliance was supplied in keenness and endeavour" (3-0).

Two further games were played in March, At home, Exeter managed to hold Bridgend to a second drawn match in the season. "A boggy pitch restricted play to a minimum" and a fierce wind did not help. It was no surprise that neither side managed to score (0-0). For the final Saturday of the month the Bath ground had recovered from being flooded and was to be used for the first time since January. An early Bath dropped goal was overtaken by a Ford try and a Paul conversion. Bath's winning try came one minute from the end of the game (5-7).

In the middle of March, the Rugby Football Union had asked clubs to comply with a Government request to cease playing mid-week matches, except on statutory holidays. This request was probably issued in order to keep the wheels of industry and commerce turning to aid the difficult post-war economic recovery, yet by the end of the month Exeter was expressing the wish to recover lost fixtures through mid-week games. As it turned out, Exeter was not alone in this hope.

Exeter undertook a punishing schedule of as many as nine matches during the month of April. This was, perhaps, an over ambitious task for the team. The outcome was six defeats and only three victories that unbalanced what might have been considered a good playing record.

The month started well enough with Easter successes at home against Bristol University and Wasps. In addition on the Saturday a team was fielded in a seven-a-side competition at Paignton. Despite poor weather, Exeter won. Meanwhile, in similar weather conditions – a strong wind and heavy rain – Exeter fielded several reserves against the students from Bristol. The ground churned up and "good football was impossible" but Exeter did manage to score three tries (12-0).

Easter Monday's game against Wasps found Jack Harrison on vacation from Loughborough College, appearing at full-back. With his side five points ahead he made two try saving tackles. In a thrilling finish, Exeter added two more tries and a conversion (19-11).

Two days later a mid-week evening meeting at Bristol proved to be "a hard and robust game" during which "a little less whistle would probably have been more appreciated". The Western Morning News thought that the game "was spoilt in a measure by constant infringements by both sets of forwards". For Bristol "victory was deserved but unimpressive" whilst Exeter put up a great fight with the brilliant Ford the best player on the field. Only one try was scored (4-9).

Only three days later the team was on its way to meet Redruth where the home team snatched a surprise victory. Exeter went nine points ahead at half time but fell away. The 3,000 spectators were "cock-a-hoop" at the end (9-11).

Another three days passed before Exeter had the even more daunting task of facing Cardiff at the County Ground in front of 4,000 spectators. Cardiff went ahead with a penalty goal after five minutes but nothing more was added until the visitors scored a try near the end of the game. Home supporters were disappointed by "a slow moving Exeter side that only once or twice showed any promise of scoring". The Cardiff team "was yards faster and dictated the course of the game" (0-6).

The home game against Teignmouth that was postponed in October was replaced by a visit by Exeter to help the local club's finances. No charity was shown by the home forwards who had Exeter rattled and all the home team's points were posted by half-time (3-11). This was Exeter's fourth defeat in a row. "What is wrong?" asked the Express & Echo.

Two days later, on home soil, Exeter were faced with another difficult encounter in an evening game. Haydn Tanner's XV did contain eight Internationals, less than in the previous year's fixture, yet the team was still "Too Good for Exeter". The visiting pack was heavier and faster whilst the backs were not hampered by a high wind and a light ball. The Invitation XV scored all its points in the first half but could have scored more "if they had extended themselves". "Exeter never looked like scoring until about five minutes from the end" but "the team was not disgraced" (3-14). Possibly as a result of

the club's recent poor form, the spectators numbered only about 3,000 – half the number of the previous season attendance.

Combined Colleges allowed some respite during the closing heavy schedule. The game displayed “fast and clever football by both sides”. Ford showed signs of getting back to form but on the debit side both Exeter wingers suffered injury during the match (22-11).

The curtain came down on the fifteen-a-side season at the County Ground with a Monday evening game against Neath. The Welsh visitors made eight changes to the team that was listed in the match programme yet this did not appear to diminish the team's performance. The Western Morning News reported “It was an interesting, if not exciting game. If it tended to become over rough it was because of enthusiasm” (3-11). This was Sid Waller's last game before retiring.

The national attention attracted by Exeter's 1945-6 playing season led to an invitation to take part in the prestigious Middlesex Sevens competition that took place annually at Twickenham. Waterloo was the other guest side taking part. A large number of Exeter followers had expressed an interest in joining an excursion train to London to support the team on the 3rd May. Their hopes were confounded when the railway companies cancelled all excursions as the date coincided with the F.A. Cup Final at Wembley.

More disappointment was to follow. Exeter entered the competition at the fifth round to face London Irish who included two Irish international players in their VII. Exeter took the tie into extra time but the speed of the Irish won the day (3-6 a.e.t.). Exeter's three points came from a Ford penalty goal. This performance proved to be an anti-climax to a season that had promised so much. The Exeter playing party was not allowed to claim expenses for the Twickenham experience but later the club was given £112 (£3,000) as its share of the profits from the tournament. This money was donated by the club, in turn, to the Mayor's Appeal for Cancer charity.

The final record of the first fifteen stood at Played 38 Won 23 Drawn 4 Lost 11. In earlier years this would have been regarded as a satisfactory result but, after the two full seasons either side of the war, the hopes for an even better record were not realised. The second team won nine and drew two out of 22 games played whilst the Colts won seven and drew four in a programme of 17 matches. All three team scored more points than their opponents. At the Annual General Meeting, the club pledged support to anyone prepared to start a junior club within the city.

Financially the total profit made on the season was £616 (£16,000) whilst the bank balance stood at £1,111 (£30,000). Much had been done to improve the County Ground for spectators. The club wanted to do more but was faced with post-war restrictions.

It was also reported that the captain, Colin Paul, had played in 36 of the 38 games whilst Cecil Ford had scored 108 points in the season.

In March it had been announced that Exeter was contemplating sending a team to Germany but no further mention of this proposal can be found.