

76th Year 1947-8

“Not bad for a season when the club has been so beset by injury, sickness, departures to college and services that the team has been in an almost constant state of flux” was the way an observer summed up the playing record for 1947-8. The senior team just managed to achieve a positive balance with victories topping defeats by two games. Post war contingencies were still affecting the club. National Service remained in full operation and potential first team players were frequently called-up to join one of the armed forces. Those returning from duty often sought to continue their education at various universities or other institutes of further education. Disruption to selection was inevitable.

However, the quantity of players was not a problem as, by the end of the season, Tom Roebuck was able to call on sufficient numbers to field four teams in the club's name. It was quality that was missing. The number of teams in itself presented a different problem in the light of post war restrictions and rationing. A new set of jerseys had been ordered for the 1st XV but in order to purchase them the club sent out an urgent appeal for clothing coupons. Later in the season a similar appeal was launched when the club was about to field a 4th XV.

Captain for this difficult year was Alan Arthur (“Ack-Ack”) Brown, a native of the north-west, who first appeared for the club in 1937. His senior career began with St. Helens Old Boys and continued with Headingley when he attended Carnegie College. During this period he represented Lancashire eleven times. He joined the staff of St. Luke's College in 1937, playing for the College team and Exeter. He appeared regularly for Devon both before and after the war, being capped 38 times. In 1938 he won international recognition on selection for England against Scotland. In this disrupted season he was added to the list of injured when dislocating a shoulder when scoring a try during a game on Boxing Day. His hopes of making a return at Easter did not materialise and, in effect, the injury ended his playing career at the age of thirty seven.

Hot weather hampered pre-season preparations. Sweltering conditions at the County Ground caused players to abandon their jerseys during a warm-up session at the end of August. A hard ground at the start of September meant that instead of a full-scale final trial being staged, the players had to engage in a session of touch-rugby. This was hardly useful preparation for the opening fixture when lack of proper training told.

Llanelli, on an early season tour, came to the County Ground on Monday 9th September for a match that attracted 2,000 spectators. For twenty minutes Exeter held a territorial advantage before conceding a simple penalty goal. The visitors were much heavier and were better at finishing movements but it was not until mid-way through the second half that they added a dropped goal and a try. Exeter's goal kicking was poor (0-10).

With agreement from Exmouth, a fixture with Exeter was switched to the County Ground. Despite the absence of seven regulars, three of whom were playing for the combined Devon & Cornwall XV against the touring Australian team, Exeter ran away with the game (33-3). In contrast, Sidmouth, on their own ground, gave a good account of themselves by keeping the second half all-square after going eleven points down (17-6).

A visit to The Rectory was “By strict arithmetic a dismal day for Exeter but in fact the game was attractive all through”. Devonport Services' three-quarters were in irresistible form, scoring eight tries to three by Exeter. Within five minutes the visitors took a five point lead after which the Exeter defence was weakened by injury. Exeter “never gave up the fight” but apart from fourteen minutes in the second half “they were out of the picture”. “Jolly good show Services!” said the compiler of the next Exeter home programme. During the game full back Ben Howe was injured, Colin Paul suffered a broken nose and centre Martin went off with a damaged leg after scoring two tries. Winger Gerry Brown had agreed to interrupt his honeymoon to play in this game. Not since April 1928 had Exeter conceded so many points (17-37).

Another away game was to follow, this time at The Recreation Ground, Torquay, where both teams were below strength because of injuries. Exeter selected C. Mathis, a pre-war player on holiday from South Africa, to play in the pack and J. Twitchen, a reserve scrum-half, at full back. Unfortunately the latter was another player on honeymoon so he did not receive the card informing him of his selection. Peter Plumpton, a forward, was drafted in to play full-back whilst Jack Force took his place amongst the forwards. Strangely, it was recorded that "Exeter showed good understanding" though "it was not the brilliant Exeter of last season". Reports suggest Exeter was plucky whilst Athletic was lucky (6-6).

In view of mounting injuries and a forthcoming fixture with Redruth, a mid-week encounter with St. Luke's College was postponed.

Entertaining Redruth, Exeter held the lead at half time but then the visitors dropped two goals. After twenty minutes of being penned in their own half the Redruth forwards took command and decided the issue to the disappointment of a crowd of 2,000. Cecil Ford made a return to the Exeter team and scored all the points for his team but he "showed reticence in tackling" (9-14). When Barnstaple came to call both teams found themselves below strength. The visiting wing forwards cancelled out many Exeter three-quarter movements but they were unable to stop Idris Roberts scoring a late winning try. Barnstaple without their regular goal kicker failed to convert five penalty goal attempts (9-6).

A mid-week fixture with Blundell's School was cancelled due to the hardness of the ground at Tiverton. Three days later, without the services of their captain Alan Brown, Exeter defeated Old Cranleighans (17-11).

A much weakened team, missing six regulars, was sent to Plymouth to face Albion. "There was little to enthuse over in a game where both teams obviously missed their county players". The game was spoilt by "the number of free kicks for petty but continuous offences". "Play was mostly scrappy" and it took two individual forward efforts to win the game for the home side (3-10).

At home to Somerset Police, Exeter then turned in what was described as a brilliant performance against a disappointing visiting team. The lighter Exeter pack was more than a match for the Police in set scrums (21-0). Again missing half a dozen players on County duty, Exeter faced the Royal Naval Engineering College without its two Devon representatives. Exeter went ten points ahead and led again in the second half but a conversion from the touch-line won the game for the College (15-16).

In the middle of November Exeter went to Exmouth and won decisively (41-0). The teams had now met twice in the season and the points balance in Exeter's favour was 75-3. "Should Exmouth be an "A" team game?" asked the Express & Echo.

Exeter, at home, then defeated St. Bartholomew's Hospital in a mid-week game (21-0) before facing Weston super Mare on the County Ground. Missing only Bill Sanders, who had influenza, Exeter staged a second-half rally but was unable to breach the visitors' defence (3-9). Remaining at home the team then defeated London Hospital by two penalty goal to a goal but Exeter "could derive very little satisfaction from their success. They disappointed in every department" (6-5). At Taunton, without Madge and Ford, Exeter fell to the Somerset Police forwards who reversed the outcome of the earlier encounter. "Strong scrummaging Police forwards won the match". The home side scored three tries to a dropped goal (4-9).

Early December proved to be a time of "weal and woe" for the club. On Tuesday 2nd of December Cecil Ford had attended a selection committee meeting to choose the team to play against Somerset Police. Ford was an automatic choice but shortly before the match he withdrew from the team. He was unwell over the weekend and was taken to Whipton Isolation Hospital where he was diagnosed as

having contracted Infantile Paralysis (Polio Myelitis). This affliction was a scourge of post war Britain and Ford was the eighth victim of the epidemic in Exeter. As a precaution to prevent the spread of infection, because Ford was the sports master at Hele's School, all team games with other schools were cancelled. Cecil Ford would no longer be able to play rugby nor pursue his role as captain of Devon County Cricket Club in the Minor Counties Championship.

A day or so after Ford's diagnosis, the club learned that his half-back partner, Dick Madge, had been selected to play for England against Australia the following January. Madge was now at an age (33) when he might have given up all hope of playing for his country. An irony stemming from these two events was that just before the war Ford and Madge were being tipped to represent their country as a half back partnership.

Described as "an inspired performance", Exeter, at home, defeated Bath when both teams had supplied four players to their respective county sides. "Exeter deserved to win as they missed no scoring opportunity". Eric Chave scored a try and kicked a further twelve points (21-12). Chave was again in fine kicking form the following week against visitors Torquay Athletic but, this time, it was to no avail. "Only fine kicking by Chave saved the home team from more serious defeat" whilst the backs "showed a marked tendency to mishandle" (6-11).

For a Boxing Day fixture at the County Ground, Cross Keys turned up short of numbers as two forwards had missed their train connection at Newport. Two local substitute players took the visitors up to full complement. On his arrival at the ground, Dick Madge was given a great ovation by the crowd but he did not play "in risky conditions". The game turned out to be "a mud-lark". Despite the greasy conditions, play was fast and though not fielding their chosen pack, the visitor's forwards played better than the home eight. In fact, so well did the substitutes Harry Moore and John Roach play that Cross Keys invited both to join them for their next match at Weston! Exeter managed to win but not before skipper Alan Brown had dislocated a shoulder in scoring a try (6-0).

The playing surface was still sticky for the visit by Old Blues. Exeter held a five point lead until the closing stages when the visitors, having taken advantage of the wind in the second half, overtook their hosts (5-8). Noticeable at these Christmas holiday games in rainy conditions were the empty spaces around the ground and in the stand.

To start the New Year, Exeter again came unstuck at Teignmouth. Seven first choices were not available for selection. During the game full-back Harry Moore collided with an opponent and went off for the remainder of the game. Exeter came close to scoring but did not and Chave missed several penalty attempts (0-5).

Following his successful first cap for England, Dick Madge was set to captain his club for the first time in the home meeting with Bridgend. The game did not turn out the way the Exeter supporters had hoped. The encounter was said to be the "least entertaining game of the season". "Madge for once failed to be an inspiration and his failure was reflected in the performance of the team as a whole". The Exeter display was summed up like an old style school report – "Could have done better". "It was the home team's shortcomings rather than Bridgend's performance which decided the issue" (3-7).

Remaining at home, Exeter faced London Welsh. The Express & Echo acclaimed "New life in the team". Unfortunately the home club was beset by injury during the game. Roy Pike damaged a knee, M. Hartland, the captain of Blundell's School, hurt his shoulder and full back Hunt had to go off with an injured back. The Sunday Times observed "London Welsh should have won by a wider margin but for a resolute defence. Only on two occasions did Exeter look like scoring." No mention was made of the fact that Exeter had only twelve men on the field come the end of the match, during the course of which Colin Paul had occupied three different positions. The winning Welsh try was scored by Jack Harrison's brother. Both brothers were occupying the fly-half position for their respective clubs (0-5).

“Much better than we have seen for some time” commented an Exeter match programme after the home fixture with Devonport Services. A game of two halves, Exeter scored a try in the first half but it was in the second period that the home forwards took command. Jack Carpenter, who made a comeback after a long absence lost two teeth during the game (11-0). Although the club was on the road to recovery, the planned mid-week meeting with St. Luke’s was cancelled for the second time. The player crisis, especially amongst the backs was illustrated by the selection of Les Davies, normally a second row forward of county standard, to play centre three-quarter in a home game against the Royal Naval Engineering College. Davies was not too happy but performed adequately in his new role. In fact the display delighted spectators as, despite a greasy ball, Exeter scored seven tries, three of them by winger Gerry Brown (27-3).

At Paignton the recovery continued with more “delightful handling despite adverse weather conditions”. Gaining possession from most set scrums, Exeter gave full value for the victory (10-0). A slight set back followed at Barnstaple where, in front of the best crowd of the season, the home side gained revenge for a defeat earlier in the season. Exeter won two thirds of the scrums but the Barnstaple forwards were better in the loose (0-3). A visit to Weston was cancelled due to a fall of snow.

Overnight rain softened the ground for a visit by Old Paulines on the last Saturday in February. Play was fast and open and all the scoring was completed just after the start of the second half (15-3). At the third attempt Exeter was able to fulfil its commitment to play St. Luke’s College. A Torquay Athletic player was recruited to complete the line-up but he was not a success, missing three penalty goal attempts and generally having a poor match. To add insult to injury Colin Paul missed an easy conversion that would have won the match (3-3). Despite all the efforts that went into eventually staging this game, the result was not included in the club’s official record.

Before the next game, at Beacon Park, Plymouth Albion Supporters presented Dick Madge with an inscribed barometer in recognition of his contribution to Devon rugby and his selection for England. On the field Exeter suffered a second defeat by Plymouth Albion in the season. Play ebbed and flowed, the highlight being a brilliant try by Norman Humphries. The Express & Echo observed “Although losers by a narrow margin in a hard fought game, Exeter eschewed any hint of the win at any price which is becoming all too prevalent by some clubs” (10-13).

Two more tough games resulted in two more defeats. At Bristol “there was really only one team in the game” whilst Exeter “simply could not get into the game”. Some unorthodox moves by the home team scrum-half appeared to baffle the visitors (0-20). A week later at Bridgend, Exeter again failed to score (0-14).

On the same day as the Bridgend game, worse news was to come from Murrayfield where Dick Madge, on his fourth appearance for England, damaged knee ligaments after only seven minutes play and had to leave the field. This injury ended his rugby career.

Exeter then made a successful run in to complete the season, losing only one of the last seven games. All three Easter matches and two on tour in Cornwall ended in victory. First up, on Easter Saturday, came Headingley for their first encounter with Exeter. “The daring experiment of introducing young blood into the team was fully justified” (8-4). Cecil Ford watched this game from the back of an ambulance. On Monday Old Millhillians became another victim of Exeter’s recovered form (21-3). Guy’s Hospital, winners of the Hospital’s Cup, suffered a similar fate the next day (11-3).

On the following Saturday Bristol paid the home team the compliment of playing a tight game to counter Exeter’s improvement. A larger than usual crowd was disappointed by a dull display. Both teams were criticised for being over-keen and there “was far too much scrummaging in mid-field” (3-5).

As many as 29 players were included in the party that went on tour to Cornwall in April. The first game, at Redruth, turned out to be a battle of the forwards and was “disappointing and not up to the usual standard”. Played at a fast pace with a lively ball the match suffered because there was “too much kicking” and “no cohesion”. Gerry Brown scored a try in the last minute to give Exeter a victory they just about deserved (6-3). The following Monday at Penzance & Newlyn, in front of a crowd of 4,000, Exeter went six points down by half-time before going ahead by ten points in the second half. The home side staged a late rally to score eight more points (16-14). The touring party’s delight was lyrically expressed by the Express & Echo reporter when relating to the journey home. “In the early hours of to-day the Devon countryside rang with the triumphant song of the Exeter rugger team returning from their first 100% successful tour for many a season.”

The final game of the season, at the County Ground, fell a little flat in comparison. “An uninteresting game of little skill” probably said it all about the meeting with Gloucester. Exeter gained three-quarters of the possession but had only two penalty goals to show for it. No tries were scored by either side (6-6).

The season saw the revival of the Supporters’ Club which undertook the provision of a scoreboard and catering for visiting teams, compilation and sale of programmes and hire and distribution of grandstand cushions. Membership of this new organisation topped 130.

At the Annual General Meeting a presentation was made to Dick Madge to honour his selection for International honours. The presentation was “a worse ordeal than playing at Twickenham” responded the modest Madge. He acknowledge help he had received from Cecil Ford, Peter Steele-Perkins and Alan Brown. Then he added “We do not take it too seriously but when we are on the field we play flat out and try to win. After all we are not professionals. One thing I do deplore is this business of trying to regiment XV’s and make players professionals”. This view would not have been uncommon in the strictly amateur days of the time.

Dick Madge joined the Exeter club in 1932 and became a first team regular in 1933. His first appearance for Devon came in 1935 and then he went on to play over forty game for his county. He was appointed captain of Devon but was not elected to this position for his club. He gained four International caps in all. The knee injury suffered during his last game for England ended his rugby career. Soon after the start of the next season, he moved away from the area following his acceptance of an appointment as a local government surveyor at Evesham.

Dick Madge returned in later life to Exeter where he died in 1996.