

24th Season 1895-6

Assuming the captaincy in his own right, Percy Preece approached the new season with the same vigour and enthusiasm that he had shown a year previously. From mid-September he organised a series of training sessions (including walks), skills practice and trials leading to a final trial match between the Possibles and Probables at the end of the month. Exeter, almost certainly, had never before been better prepared for a new season.

The captain had been born in London but he learned his rugby at Worcester College. He then played for Worcester and later Burton where he was employed in the brewing industry. He moved to Exeter as a district store manager when in the employment of the brewing company Allsopp. He joined the St. Thomas club and stayed until its demise and then started playing regularly for Exeter in January 1894.

Extensive player recruitment meant that three teams could now be fielded for the first time. The teams were to be referred to as Exeter, the A team and the B team but on the 18th October the "Western Times" reported "Exeter Chiefs go away from us again to-day to encounter another Somerset team ...", the first recorded use of the title Exeter Chiefs. However it must be pointed out that the term "Chiefs" was a generic one that was not exclusive to Exeter. For a few seasons the premier Albion team was also given the title Chiefs following the club's second string being entered into the Devon Senior Cup competition in place of the senior team. Nonetheless Exeter Chiefs entered into common usage for years to come.

Following the thorough pre-season training defeat in the opening fixture away at Bridgwater must have come as a disappointment (3-7). Opponents for the next three games also came from Somerset and the initial reverse was amply avenged by inflicting heavy defeats on Weston (21-5), Taunton (21-3) and Bath (34-0). Three more victories followed including an away win at Clifton (6-0). At this latter game the players were all changed ready to for the kick-off when it was realised that there was no ball available so they all "took refuge in an outhouse" while the Clifton secretary took a cab into Bristol to obtain one.

During this encouraging start the only criticism of the club came from a reporter who commented that dirty white jerseys made the players look "poor and flabby". The colours were still in the form of a white jersey with a black diagonal sash.

Following a draw at home to the strong Wellington team in front of 2,000 spectators, Exeter lost only its second game of the season at the end of November away to Torquay Athletic (0-3). From mid-December a run of five home games saw the club victorious three times including revenge over Bridgwater (6-0). The other wins were against Saracens (10-4) and Redruth (3-0) the first club from Cornwall to appear on the Exeter fixture card.

Defeats came at the hands of Barnstaple (5-7), at this stage probably the strongest club in Devon, and the touring London side Old Merchant Taylors (6-7).

The first game of the second half of the season saw the team travelling to Bladdeley to face old rivals Albion. Nearing full-time with neither side having registered any

points, Albion was awarded a penalty kick, the reason for which no Exeter supporter could explain. The kick was goaled and the home side thus won by three points to nil. Despite the loss Exeter's performance with a slightly under strength team, was regarded as highly satisfactory. Part of the Albion stand had been reserved by secretary Mudge for use by Exeter's travelling supporters.

The following week a crowd of 3,000 turned up at the County Ground to witness the return match against Torquay Athletic. Avenging the defeat in November, Exeter won by five points to three whereupon "even the costers inside the ground threw up their baskets in their excitement".

Two defeats followed - the first at Wellington (3-9) and at home to Bristol by a single score. Yet again in this latter fixture Exeter felt aggrieved. The players thought a legitimate try had been scored but the referee ruled otherwise. When challenged by Charles Mudge acting as touch-judge the referee admitted he had made a mistake but restarted the game by ordering a scrum and so the game was lost. Amid home victories came two more away defeats by Barnstaple (3-9) and the Royal Naval Engineering College (4-5). The final eight matches of the season saw only one more defeat that being at Easter against the touring London club Lennox (8-13).

Very creditable drawn games were played against Swansea (3-3), Bath (0-0) away and, in the penultimate match, away at Bristol (11-11). This latter performance was made more praiseworthy as Sid Labbett and Fred Escott, the regular half-backs, were absent, their places being taken by Brewer and Vosper of the A team. The Exeter team "must be congratulated on their British stubbornness" was one post-match comment.

The final game of the season took place at the County Ground before a record number of spectators. The opposition was the Albion team from Devonport. Since the clubs first meeting in 1887 Exeter had won only the first three encounters. Then, of the next sixteen games, two ended in scoreless draws with Albion winning the rest, often by large margins. This time, at last, Exeter won. The margin was eight points to three, and Albion were outplayed, out-thought and outlasted by a fitter team. The victory occasioned much rejoicing in the city. Such was the commitment of the Exeter team that one forward played for twenty minutes with a broken rib. "Dash it Browning, play on until you can no longer", was said to be the comment of the captain.

Percy Preece was not always so hard on his team-mates. To his credit he associated with his team off the field which led one reporter to state "The days of cliquism are evidently gone", suggesting previous captains held themselves somewhat aloof from the players. Loyalty to the team was shown by "Ducky" Powell who was married on a Saturday morning in October and then turned out in the afternoon to score a try against Weston.

The club sought permission from the D.R.F.U. to award a testimonial, in the form of a clock, to Sid Labbett on the occasion of his marriage later in the season, and consideration of the welfare of all players was shown by arranging a doctor to be present at home games.

The ability to consistently field their best players was a main reason for a successful season. Of 33 games played the Chiefs won 19 and drew 4 games. In 10 defeats the biggest losing margin was only six points. The defence conceded double figures in only two matches, and one of these ended in a draw.

The A team played 28 matches winning 18 and drawing 3 whilst the B team was fielded 20 times winning 4 and drawing 7 games.

In April Percy Preece announced his retirement as a player. He too was awarded a testimonial by the club. He did not don a jersey again but became a member of the committee for several years and also acted as referee. For someone who had almost single-handedly brought about the revival of Exeter Football Club it is sad to record that later life was not so kind to him.

In May 1903, being described as a travelling salesman, he was to appear at the Exeter County Court having been sued for debt by a cycle dealer. He had been out of work for a year and being penniless had been living on the generosity of his friends. Percy Preece was to die in London from asthma and heart problems at the relatively early age of 54 in 1924.