

102nd Year 1973-4

The Annual Report for 1973-4 announced, "Once again, the season has been a very successful one with a very good playing record although it was not as successful as the past two seasons". The reason for this decline was attributed to the absence of key players who had retired or suffered long term injury. As many as thirteen players represented Devon in the County Championship during the course of the competition.

Playing six fewer games, the senior team won 27 of the 39 games played. Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the season for Paul Baxter, re-appointed as captain, was the lack of success in competitive competitions.

Seven games were crammed into the opening month bringing mixed results. A first visit by Blackrock from Ireland started the season and a close victory ensued (16-12). At Paignton came a more straightforward victory (17-6). Visiting Rosslyn Park won a close game (12-17) on a Friday but the next day Exeter easily defeated Esher who were on an early season tour (38-19).

The first round of the R.F.U. Knock-out Cup came early and Exeter made an equally early exit from the competition when the team was beaten at Clifton in a cliff-hanger (20-22). After this disappointment came partial compensation when Bath was defeated on a muddy County Ground. The visitors had not started the season well and did not start this match very well either. After half an hour Exeter led by nineteen points. Bath's plight got worse when captain Peter Hall was sent off following a brawl during which an Exeter player had been punched (22-4). The Bath committee later took the unprecedented decision to suspend Hall for two matches. On the last Saturday of the month disappointment returned when visiting Streatham-Croydon just took the spoils (10-12).

October began with controversy. Scheduled to appear at the County Ground was Penryn and many spectators turned up only to learn that the team from Cornwall had cried off at the eleventh hour, too late for the news to be broadcast as widely as would normally have been the case. The reason cited was that ten Penryn players were taking part in a Cornwall trial game. Gerry Brown, the Exeter chairman, described Penryn's behaviour as "arrogant, lacking in integrity and an irresponsible way of dealing with the problem". The two teams did not meet again for three seasons. Ironically, Exeter's next fixture, away at Redruth, was also cancelled but with no recriminations.

After two weeks without a game, Exeter then visited Portway for the first time to face the Birmingham club. Both Andy Jeffery and Graham Milford were injured during the first half and play was untidy. Exeter actually took the lead with a Phil Holman try but in the end the pressure applied by the home team took the game away from the visitors (4-11). Three straightforward wins followed – away at Sidcup (18-7), at home to Taunton (29-9) and away to Exmouth on a County day (37-6). The run was halted by St. Luke's College who won at the County Ground (12-23) before a re-arranged team won a comfortable victory at Cheltenham (20-6).

December began with five consecutive home victories, all but one against local opposition. Torquay Athletic succumbed quite easily (21-0), then Barnstaple again played in their usual uncompromising style (14-0). In the middle of this sequence Glamorgan came and went home defeated (24-10). The improving Plymouth Albion club nearly had the measure of Exeter (12-7) before Exmouth were outplayed in the traditional Boxing Day game (52-12).

The old year ended on a down note at Kingsholme where Exeter was unable to match the power of Gloucester (10-37). The New Year almost began with embarrassment when at home in a Devon Cup tie Exeter squeezed past Bideford by a single point in a very low scoring game (4-3). At Priory Park, Taunton was an easier proposition (19-9) and, after the cancellation of a home game against Clifton due to an unfit pitch, Bridgwater & Albion suffered a similar fate to the previous encounter with a Somerset team (25-16).

Two away games followed. Exeter lost at Pandy Park against Cross Keys (9-10) but against London Hospital the Devon team revived its scoring potential (35-6). A similar pattern followed with a hard fought win at the County Ground against Weston super Mare (14-4), a cancellation at Barnstaple and a substantial home win against a hospital team. This time the victims represented Guy's Hospital (27-6).

A week later there was a taste of what was to come for Exeter when a trip to Beacon Park ended in a defeat, albeit a narrow one, by Plymouth Albion (6-10). A Devon Cup game at Kingsbridge presented no particular problems (30-3) nor did a home game against St. Ives, though the Cornish team put up strong resistance (22-16). The winning trend was reversed with three consecutive defeats. Firstly at the hands of St. Luke's College (11-15) and then by Saracens in London (3-9). Exeter had turned these games into stern contests as witnessed by the closeness of the scores but what was to follow came as a surprise and a great disappointment. Exeter returned to Beacon Park to meet Plymouth Albion in a Devon Cup Semi-Final. So far during the season the two teams had met twice, both teams winning the home fixture. The margin between the teams had be five points and four points. This time Exeter, playing well below expectations, came away after suffering a decisive defeat (10-32). This was the low point of Exeter's season.

Three days later Exeter set off on a week-end tour to Cornwall, the outcome of which did provide some sort of compensation. On a Friday night Camborne was defeated and the following day Penzance & Newlyn suffered a similar fate (21-12). Disappointments had not entirely escaped Exeter as the trip to the Duchy was followed by an excursion to London where the team lost to Esher in a game they might have expected to win (3-13).

Showing resilience, Exeter then finished the season in fine style. On Easter Saturday Coventry came to call for the first time since March 1951. On this occasion the Midlands team was heralded as possibly being the leading side in the country having won the R.F.U. Knock-out Cup the previous season and topped the unofficial club championship. The tourists were slow to settle and Exeter had most of the play for the first quarter of an hour but it was the visiting team, having settled, that went into the lead. By half time Exeter had hit back with two tries to snatch the lead and a third try after the interval, without reply from the visitors, made the game safe (21-10). The Coventry Evening Telegraph stated "Coventry fielded a complete second team" but the match programme indicates that half the side had experience at County level.

Commenting on the Easter Monday game against Moseley, the Birmingham press was more generous. "Confident Exeter end Moseley's Easter parade" ran a headline. The report criticised Moseley for being too casual. Against a side that contained five England internationals, Exeter achieved a memorable victory that was regarded as the highlight of the season (19-16).

On the last Saturday of the season Exeter entertained Redruth and won a game that ended a somewhat mixed season for the club (30-6).

Both the "A" and "B" XVs returned records that were poorer than twelve months previously and the fixture list for an Extra "B" XV was cancelled shortly after the start of the season due to lack of numbers. The Colts, although not as successful this season, did supply a number of promising players to the senior side on occasions.