

99th Year 1970-1

In Andy Cole's third season of captaincy the Exeter senior team achieved its best seasonal playing record since 1948-9 and set a standard that was to continue throughout the 1970s. Thirty nine games were played of which nine were lost and the rest won. Jack Harrison's team of 1948-9 also lost only eight games in thirty nine played but two other games were drawn. These records were not bettered until 1977-8. Moreover Exeter had scored a record number of points - 703 - in 1969-0 but this total was now eclipsed as the team scored a total of nearly 900 points.

Two other personal records went by the board. Mike Maynard, now the principle goal kicker, landed 356 points, a total that included sixteen tries. Russell Lee, a recruit from the Withycombe club, scored 39 tries. He touched down four times in a game on three occasions. Although individuals did well, as stated in the Playfair Rugby Football Annual, "Exeter's teamwork was of the highest order". In addition to his club duties, Andy Cole also captained the Devon team.

The Reddings would have been a difficult venue to start the season, especially as, at this time, Moseley was among the top clubs in the country. Giving a lively display, Exeter won a good share of the ball but lacked the thrust of the home team who were eleven points to the good at half time. Despite having to play one man short through injury, Moseley continued to dominate. According to one report, Andy Cole was heard to plead more than once "Where are you, Ex?" (8-25). Esher at the County Ground proved to be an easier proposition (17-6).

Two mid-week games brought two further victories. A Tuesday evening home match against Rosslyn Park was marked by "a cracking performance by the Exeter pack". Hampered by a knee injury, fly-half Phil Holman still played a full part in a performance marked by six tries. Park scored in the first and last five minutes of the match. By coincidence, the final score was exactly the same as when the two teams met the previous season (26-6). Two days later Newton Abbot was defeated at Rackerhayes. After another two day break Exeter, at home, demolished Torquay Athletic by a record score (51-6). The next interval between games was two weeks. Exeter entertained Devonport Services but this time there was no runaway victory. The Services pack had the measure of the Exeter eight and the home team made too many handling mistakes (26-10). Remaining at home Exeter found Redruth a less daunting task than anticipated and registered a sixth consecutive victory (36-3).

Having to make four late changes, Exeter struggled against Saracens at Southgate but after finding themselves eleven points down at half time, a rally brought a brace of tries for Mike Maynard and made for an exciting finish before Saracens added a late goal (8-16). Another defeat soon followed, facing Clifton on a day when Devon was playing Gloucestershire in the County Championship. Exeter was forced to field seven second fifteen players and the team met with its second heaviest defeat of the whole season (15-31).

Heralded as Cornish Champions for almost ten years, Penryn came to the County Ground to face Exeter "probably the strongest side in Devon". Strange to say, given these credentials, this was the first time the two clubs had met on the rugby field. Penryn was first to score but Exeter battled back. The visitors lost Peter Gribble, who was playing against his old club, with an injury for a while but despite the handicap Penryn scored again. Stung into action, Exeter then added a penalty and a converted try to lead by five points at half time. Penryn lost another player after the resumption yet it was the team from Cornwall that added the only score of the second half - but it was not enough to catch up. This was not a good performance by Exeter and the club programme the following week hoped "that Andy Cole and his players will go all out to rectify last Saturday's play when, although we won, the effort seemed rather disappointing after all the good work done by the forwards" (11-9). As an aside to this game, Penryn was to suspend for two months an ex county wing forward who refused to play in this game. The reason for his refusal was not reported.

A home win over Taunton (16-9) was followed by another unexpected defeat by Exmouth. This represented Exmouth's second consecutive win in this fixture. Both played at the Imperial Ground. Exeter did field six reserve players though this fact could not be used as an excuse for defeat (0-5). In the run up to Christmas, the next four games, all against local opposition, were all won. Firstly Exeter got the better of St. Luke's College (22-3) before winning away at Torquay Athletic (20-10) and Barnstaple (16-9). On the Saturday before the holiday period Teignmouth came to the County Ground and suffered a similar fate. One of the Exeter try scorers in this game was John Lockyer, who had made his debut for Exeter at Moseley at the start of the season after leaving the Teignmouth club (30-9). Adverse weather then prevented any play until the second Saturday in January, three matches being cancelled.

The first game on resumption of fixtures was something of a mis-match. Said one reporter "It was a fixture that really ought not to have been played, for Exeter were only four players short of the full Devon team – while Paignton by any standards are a junior side." The Queen's Park faithful may well have disagreed with this view as fixtures with senior Devon sides were much sought after by junior clubs. To add to the home side's daunting task, a prop went off injured after fifteen minutes. Exeter lost a player as well but that was twenty minutes before no-side. After the lay-off, Exeter took time to settle in the muddy conditions and when they did two highlights were provided by John Baxter who scored two tries "by going for the line like a bull over a ploughed field" (36-0).

Penzance & Newlyn posed few problems on a visit to the County Ground where the visitors "crumpled before the skill of the Exeter backs". Eleven of the dozen tries were registered by players outside the scrum. The handling of the slippery ball on a pitch coated in mud was "exhilarating" (45-3). This comfortable victory at home was followed by another when facing Bridgwater & Albion (29-0).

Club secretary, Jack Challenger, attempted to call off the next game at the County as the pitch was saturated. He was unable to contact any Abertillery officials and so when the party turned up the game went ahead in conditions that made constructive back play almost impossible. Possibly because of the conditions, the forwards came to blows on occasions (17-9). A more pleasant victory came at home against London Hospital (28-9) before Exeter visited Weston super Mare. The Somerset club, so often a pit-fall for the Devon visitors, could not make much headway especially as they had to play most of the game a man short due to injury but even so they twice went into the lead. This was not a convincing display by Exeter (20-8). Back at home, Exeter had a close match with another of their bogey teams, Barnstaple, but managed to pull through (11-9).

Exeter was awarded a walk-over in the Devon Cup when Devonport Services withdrew from the competition after eleven of a squad of twenty players became injured or unavailable. A slow start in London against Guy's Hospital meant that Exeter trailed for the first twenty minutes but thereafter the team began to throw the ball around and scored six tries in the process (32-15). It was likely to be a different sort of contest when Plymouth Albion came to face Exeter. In front of Exeter's biggest crowd of the season the two teams "produced a game worthy of the occasion and lived up to the highest expectations" said local pundit Ross Salmon. The victory went to Exeter but the question of superiority was by no means settled. Yet a gain, this was another match when Exeter's opponents were reduced to fourteen men through injury. During the period of numerical advantage, Exeter managed to score just a single penalty (13-9).

A week later Exeter was to meet St. Luke's College in a quarter-final tie for the Devon Cup. In November, Exeter had beaten the students quite comfortably but this was a much closer encounter. Success was mainly due to the boot of centre Mike Maynard who land six penalty goals and two conversions in a game described by Jack Challenger as "a real thriller" (31-25). This victory took Exeter's unbeaten run to fourteen games since November.

However Exeter's winning streak came to an end with the visit of Bridgend, the club losing at home for the first time in the season. Exeter held out until near half time but then conceded two tries. On the resumption the power of the Bridgend pack came into play and gained possession from most phases of play (13-23). Winning ways soon returned with a mid-week victory over St. Luke's College with Phil Homan being awarded the plaudits for Exeter's success. This represented a unique treble for Exeter over the students (29-3). The following Saturday saw Exeter, at home, face Bideford in a semi-final match in the Devon Cup competition. In this game it was Exeter's turn to feel the effects of injury. After twenty minutes Phil Holman had to leave the field for ten minutes and as he returned centre Andy Jeffery was being carried off with a broken ankle. Somewhat disorganised for a time, Exeter prospered through defensive mistakes by Bideford. As local reporter, Gary Newbon, succinctly put it "Exeter, except for full-back Bob Staddon, were dreadful" (22-3).

A typically crowded April schedule of ten games began with a win at home against Cheltenham (22-11) and another win, mid-week at Rectory Field, against a hapless Devonport Services side (55-0). On Easter Saturday Exeter welcomed Old Whitgiftians to the County Ground for the first meeting between the two teams. Injuries were beginning to show as Exeter named wing-forward David Hughes to play in the centre. The Old Boys held their own in the set scrums and proved to be very quick in the loose but Exeter struck with two quick first half tries. The second half saw Exeter exert more pressure to score four more tries (28-12).

On Easter Monday, Moseley, like Exeter, was on the point of breaking club records. Whereas the two other games of an Easter tour had been "rather formal dawdles" for the Midlands team, Exeter proved to be a different proposition. Exeter took the lead and scored eight points without reply but Moseley had drawn level by half time. In the second half the visitors scored two tries to Exeter's one and "were quite ready to settle for their three point advantage at the end". (13-16). After this brave display it would have been a disappointment to lose by a single point at Glamorgan Wanderers the following Saturday (16-17).

A Tuesday evening game at home against Bath probably provided the biggest surprise of the season in what Bath described as "an astonishing reversal". The Bath scribe continued "it started and continued as a shambles as Bath played second best in all departments" while Exeter scored seven tries whilst the visitors managed a sole penalty goal (37-3).

The Bath result may have provided the fillip Exeter was looking for, if one was needed, only two days later the team faced Torquay Athletic at the Recreation Ground in the Devon Cup Final. On a rainswept night the team played "with nerve and elan that never left the result in any doubt". In the treacherous conditions it was said that even the Torquay supporters were applauding adventurous open play. Exeter crossed for eight tries to win the trophy for the first time since its reintroduction. It may have been an invidious decision, given Exeter's all round team play, to select a "Man of the Match" but a seven man panel gave the award to scrum-half Graham Milford (33-3).

Two days after the cup triumph, Exeter were in Redruth fielding a team that showed only one change from the cup winning XV. The margin of victory this time was not nearly so emphatic (8-3).

Another new innovation then presented itself. It had been decided that the cup winners of Devon and Cornwall should play off for the "Championship of the South West". The game took place in Exeter and St. Ives was the travelling team. The match "crackled with tension throughout". Exeter fielded the same team that won the Devon Cup but lost stand-off Phil Holman with a cracked collar bone just after half-time. He had tried to prevent the St. Ives score that drew the teams level. The loss of Holman spurred Exeter on and "faced with such cold blooded efficiency, St. Ives began to crumble". At the end skipper Andy Cole was chaired off the field by his team-mates. Winger Russ Lee went in for four tries, one of them after a 70 yard sprint. In doing so he broke the club individual record for tries scored in a season. "A great match, from which both sides emerged with honour" (29-13).

After “The Lord Mayor’s Show” came a visit to Kingsholm where Gloucester showed no respect for the new champions, beating Exeter by a wide margin (12-35).

Present at the Saracens game in London was an England selector, R.E.G. “Dickie” Jeeps the former England and British Lions scrum-half. He was there to cast an eye over Bob Staddon. Before the month was out another selector watched the Exeter-Penryn game. After being under scrutiny for four games, Bob was selected for an England trial. Up to this season many local observers questioned why he had not been a regular selection for Devon. He had now made his mark. Bob was an epitome of the modern full-back, often, when the occasion arose, joining or initiating attacking moves from well inside his own half of the field. Not long before the fullback in Rugby Union had been seen as the last line of defence and was judged by the strength and length of his touch-kicking than his attacking flair.

Bob Staddon had been a bastion of the Exeter club since becoming a regular player in 1966-7. He had there in support in bad times, as well as the good. His commitment into the current professional era.