

67th Year 1938-9

At the Annual General Meeting in June Fred Job said he was proud at the start of the season to have been elected captain and he was even prouder at the end. The team had enjoyed its best playing season since resumption of activities following the First World War. It was stated that 42 games had been played with ten losses whereas the club's entry in the Rugby Football Annual records a match total of 43 games played and numbers defeats at eleven. The difference is likely to have been caused by how the club viewed the status of a match at Tiverton towards the end of the season.

Some fifty players attended a final practice match whilst leading players like Charlie Ford and Norman Humphries were absent still playing cricket. The start on the first Saturday in September at Torquay Athletic was disappointing. Exeter lost the game in the first half when the lead changed hands twice. There was no scoring in the second period as the players on both sides tired (8-10). A mid-week win at home against Sidmouth was more encouraging. The visitors gained a lot of possession but Exeter scored three tries to a penalty goal (9-3).

Such was Exeter's reputation for open rugby that the team attracted a record crowd at Bridgwater & Albion. The home team had to fight hard for victory (11-19). Another away game this time brought victory at Barnstaple. For the evening kick-off on the first day of Barnstaple's Fair Week Exeter turned up forty minutes late and as a consequence only thirty minutes was played in each half. Barnstaple took the lead against the run of play but the visitors, despite a slippery ball, managed to register two tries (6-3).

New opponents appeared at the County Ground. Bideford in the hope of claiming entry into the Devon Senior Cup competition enlisted the aid of Exeter who agreed to give the north Devon club a fixture. The home team scored a solitary try in the first half but added another seven in the second period. At one point 21 points were scored in a period of twelve minutes (32-0).

A mid-week evening match at Sidmouth provided another comfortable victory. Though the teams were well matched up front Exeter held the advantage behind the scrum (24-3). At Paignton Exeter was given a fright in a keenly contested game. Paignton scored two tries to one. For a time Exeter lost the services of Colin Paul with a knee injury but he returned to see out the final minutes (8-6). Back at home Exeter, with a weight advantage in the pack, dominated the Royal Naval Engineering College (33-10).

Dick Madge played an outstanding game against Old Paulines (old boys of St. Paul's School, London) on a successful trip to Thames Ditton (13-6). However the team's momentum was halted when playing host to Redruth a week later. "Play Unworthy of Both Clubs" headed the Western Morning News report. "The match rarely rose above the mediocre" and two visiting forwards received warnings from the referee. Redruth took their chances and Exeter disappointed after a run of six victories (0-13).

Exeter then had two weeks to recover due to a county game being staged at the County Ground. Playing host to Woodford the team recovered its poise and a defeat the previous season was avenged. Ford, having missed the Redruth game, secured victory by taking a pass in his own 25 and after weaving his way through defenders he touched down under the posts covering over three-quarters of the length of the field in the process (8-3). A visit to Clifton brought another success and this time it fell to Norman Humphries to score a spectacular try. Intercepting near half way he raced in unopposed from fifty yards. Exeter added another try before half time. Clifton came back with two tries of their own, the second of which was scored right at the end of the match (10-6).

Exeter then struck a poor run of results losing three consecutive games. In atrocious conditions at the County Ground Plymouth Albion lasted better than the home side (3-12). At Cranford Exmouth were superior in all departments. Though Ford played well Exeter missed the services of Dick Madge who

was away captaining Devon (0-13). Bath playing at home were described as lucky winners. With the scores level, an Exeter try matching a Bath penalty, the home side were awarded a winning try in the final minute "the referee apparently having made a generous allowances for stoppages". There was also discussion after the game about a possible offside before the final try was scored (3-6).

"Exeter had a hard day but just managed it" was how one correspondent summed up the home game against Barnstaple. A dour struggle saw both teams playing to a standstill (6-3). H. Ellis who hailed from Cumberland was said to have been in a class of his own in the line-out. Standing 6' 3" (1.9m) Ellis had made several appearances since the start of the season but this was his last. Another forward battle due to weather conditions and another narrow victory awaited when Taunton came to call. A try by skipper Fred Job within five minutes was the only score of the game. Thereafter Exeter withstood a battering from the visiting forwards and although the home backs tried to open out no headway could be made (3-0).

An easier task came mid-week against Blundell's School. The game had been postponed by a week due to the death of the officer in charge of the school's cadet force. The scholars played gallantly against a strong Exeter XV but had to give way to greater strength and experience (37-14).

No luck came Exeter's way on a visit to Cornwall to face Redruth. Both teams tried to play open rugby despite the ground conditions. Exeter came on strongly in the second half despite a downpour but it was to no avail (5-8). The Christmas Eve match at home against Devonport Services provided an unexpected present. It heralded the start of an unprecedented run of fourteen straight victories. Well served by holiday appearances from Ken Wreford and L.P. Madge (brother of Dick) Exeter eased to victory (13-4). The Boxing Day fixture at Exmouth was cancelled because of a frozen pitch.

Still in holiday mood when Bath came for a mid-week encounter Exeter was "never in danger" (16-8). Four days later it was the turn of Newton Abbot to test Exeter at the County Ground. Phil Paul scored two brilliant tries whereas the victors "lacked ideas" (9-4). The first fixture in the New Year was against Blundell's Squirrels who provided determined opposition. In the first minute hooker Jack Williams scored a try that Ford converted but this proved to be the only scoring before half time (16-4). At The Rectory Fred Job accounted for both tries scored against Devonport Service in a closely fought game (6-5).

At this point in the season "Bard" of the "Express & Echo" bemoaned the fact that there was usually only a handful of spectators at the County Ground despite Exeter "delivering the goods". In his opinion "only competitive rugby will bring back old time enthusiasm". He would have to wait another thirty years or so for this to happen at again senior club level in Devon.

On their first visit to the city since 1913, Portsmouth came with a record that showed defeat in only two games. The visitors scored first but following an even opening half the visitors were subject to "a complete collapse" (24-3). Remaining at home Exeter, with a weakened pack, then gave Bridgwater & Albion "a lesson in team work" (14-0).

Then followed "the finest game seen at Newton for many a day". Exeter went six points down but fought back with tries from Phil Paul and Norman Humphries plus a Charlie Ford conversion (8-6). For the home game against Weston super Mare Exeter adopted their normal attacking style, even though they faced a team that had tasted defeat only twice previously. The visitors were not at full strength as two players had been supplied to Somerset for a County Championship Semi Final. Bill Sprake had been released by Honiton to fill a vacancy in the Exeter back line. Exeter went six points up in the first ten minutes and overall they displayed more thrust than the visitors. The game was described as the "Match of the Season" but the crowd was disappointingly small, especially as it was noted that Exeter City was playing away from home.

For the return match with Blundell's School a first choice back line was selected but the pack was described as half-strength. The combination of the Exeter backs proved too strong for the opposition (24-0). Three days later at Teignmouth the story was similar as the visiting three-quarters were far superior (18-3).

At Beacon Park a week later there was a dramatic end to a close game with Plymouth Albion. Spectators were left wondering if the game had ended in a draw or a win for Exeter. Right at the end of the game Exeter was awarded a penalty. Charlie Ford placed the ball for an attempt at goal. As his foot struck the ball the referee blew his whistle. He then blew his whistle again after the ball had sailed between the posts. The official did confirm that Exeter had indeed won (6-3).

A week later the game at Royal Naval Engineering College also ended in unusual circumstances. Torrential rain had made conditions so bad that the referee called a halt to play fifteen minutes into the second half. "Conditions could hardly have been worse". The score at the time of the abandonment stood and Exeter claimed another victory (11-7). Making his debut for Exeter in this game was W. Sanders the Plymouth Albion and Devon hooker who had recently joined Exeter City Police Force. Demonstrating his all-round ability Colin Paul made an appearance at full-back.

Sanders played his first home game for his new club against Exmouth but the visitors had held the advantage in the tight scrums. However, with Ford again in the limelight the home team, showing better combination, was "definitely on top" and "the margin in no way flattered Exeter". It had been two years since Exeter had defeated its seaside neighbour (18-0).

A revival of the fixture with the Combined Colleges on the first day of March was cancelled as most of the Exeter players had joined the 4th Devons Sportsmans Battalion under former captain Bill Brock and had promised to play a game against the Honourable Artillery Company in London.

After fourteen consecutive victories it was inevitable that defeat would come eventually and it came at Barnstaple by means of a last minute try. Before the match the local press reported that Exeter had won more games and scored more points than any other senior team in the country. In this encounter they could neither win nor score. In two previous encounters this season Exeter had won by six points to three. In this game the team succumbed to a last minute try. It was a classic game of two halves dominated by a strong wind, Exeter attacking without success in the first half and defending for all of the second period (0-3).

Shaking off the effects of the defeat Exeter played host to Clifton in a very open game despite heavy ground conditions and incessant rain. The visitors led twice but the difference between the sides lay with the superiority of the Exeter half-backs (14-10). Defeat returned on the visit to Weston but it was a close run thing. The home team registered a penalty. Near the end of the game Exeter claimed a try had been scored when Colin Paul sent Fred Job on the wing away for what looked like a fair try. The home crowd applauded and the Weston team lined up for the conversion but the referee thought differently. He ruled that the ball had been touched down the wrong side of the try line (0-3).

A scrappy home game against Old Blues was won but the backs were bedevilled by a lively ball and wild passes (14-0). On the following Wednesday a side containing many substitutes went to Tiverton where the biggest crowd of the season witnessed another scrappy encounter. The Tiverton newspaper nevertheless described it as the best game of the season. The Exeter team appeared disorganised and unusually Ford managed to miss six out of seven penalty attempts whereas Tiverton goaled two out of three (0-6). The status of this game is uncertain as the result was included in one official published seasonal playing record but not in the one that appeared in the club's Annual Report.

Fortunately Ford recovered his poise and his accurate goal-kicking punished several infringements by Teignmouth (17-8). Still at home Exeter fell to their first defeat in fourteen games at the County Ground. Torquay Athletic dominated up front winning "a drab match" by a solitary penalty goal (0-3).

Bouncing back Exeter then recorded its biggest victory of the season when defeating Old Edwardians from Birmingham. Yards faster than the opposition Exeter crossed for eleven tries whilst the visitors' sole try came right at the end. "Old Edwardians struck a whirlwind" ran a Birmingham newspaper headline (48-3). Easter Monday brought another win despite several changes being made. In glorious sunshine Old Millhillians matched the home fifteen in a to and fro first half by the end of which the visitors led by a try to nil. Exeter took charge of the second period and ran out clear winners (15-9).

"Saracens routed" claimed the "Western Morning News" as Exeter provided its spectators with a fitting end to the season. Despite lack of possession from set scrums, within twenty minutes Fred Job had scored a hat-trick of tries. By the end of the game both of the Paul brothers had dropped a goal (32-8).

The Annual Dinner was held at Deller's Café on the evening of the final match of the season. There was a call for club members to enlist for National Service or to join the Territorial Army. Comment was made about crowd attitude to referees on certain grounds within the county. Officials were known to cry off when appointed to those venues where spectators had a reputation for being hostile. Criticism was also levelled at the Devon R.F.U. selectors for not choosing Madge and Ford as a partnership in the County Championship.

Indeed there were many in the county who could not understand why Charlie Ford was not an automatic choice for the county team. During the course of the season he had scored 223 points for his club, a total that included ten tries. He was also a leading light when Exeter won the Devon Sevens competition at the end of April, beating Devonport Services in the final.

Despite comments about poor attendances at home matches the Annual Report stated that gate receipts showed a slight increase on the previous season. Even so, given the style of play on show, the numbers were disappointing. There was an increase in the balance in hand from £67 (just under £2,000) to £80 1s 3d (£2,300). Due to an increase in assessments and an increase in tax liabilities it was decided that the finances relating to the County Ground would in future be handled by the Devon County Ground Athletic Company Ltd. and would disappear from the club accounts.

The report was adopted at the Annual General Meeting when it was reported that both the Harlequins and "A" XV's had done well. Frank Gibbings the club second row forward was congratulated on being selected for an international trial match. Fred Job (captain) and Colin Paul (vice-captain) were both re-elected for what should have been a second year in post.

At the end of April news was received of the tragic death of Kenneth Wreford, the Exeter born centre three quarter, who had made two holiday time appearances for Exeter during the course of the season. While playing for Richmond at Torquay Athletic on April 15th he was tackled into touch and scratched his hand on a fence post. He returned to his home in Ealing where the wound appeared to have healed. Later he began to feel ill and was taken to Ealing Hospital where he died from tetanus twelve days after receiving the injury.

Ken Wreford was educated at Exeter School and made his first team debut for Exeter in January 1932 at the age of sixteen and a half. During the 1933-4 a business move took him to Bristol where he was soon playing first team rugby. Unfortunately injury blighted his time with the Bristol club and appearances were limited. A further business move took him to London where he began playing for the Richmond club during the 1937-8 season. When in Exeter at Christmas or Easter he would appear for his home club. His death came at the tragically early age of twenty-two.

