

64th Year 1935-6

The playing record fell away for the second successive season. The senior team could show only twelve victories out of a total of 38 matches reported in the local newspapers. The Rugby Football Annual playing record for the club states that fourteen out of 40 matches played ended in victory. An original fixture card for this season shows that 40 games could indeed have been played. A game against Blundell's School was not reported in the press and the season was to open with the 1st XV playing the Harlequins (the 2nd XV). This latter fixture was won and an encounter with Blundell's could well have ended in victory thus boosting the total wins for the season to fourteen. Five games had been drawn so just over half the games played ended in defeat.

It must have been a disappointing campaign. Before the season began it was thought that the pack would contain more weight than had been fielded for some time. As it turned out the main problems lay with the back division that often lacked penetration and showed an inability to score tries. Failure to field a settled, consistent team did not help matters.

The captain was E.P. (Percy) Thomas a cornerstone of the forward pack who had made his debut in the 1928-9 season and whose final appearance for the 1st XV came nearly 20 years later.

Second in command was R.J.P. (Dick) Madge an outstanding scrum-half. A product of Exeter School he had first appeared for the Exeter senior team in 1932. He soon became a fixture in the Exeter team and for seven seasons became an automatic choice for Devon in a career that spanned the second world war period. At the somewhat advanced age of 34 he was selected to play for England against Australia in 1948 and went on to figure in the next three England games in the Five Nations Tournament. In the last of these games, against Scotland, he was forced to leave the field inside the first ten minutes with torn ligaments in his left knee, an injury that ended his rugby playing career.

A surveyor by profession Madge worked successively with the St. Thomas, Totnes and Evesham District Councils.

Early in September Christopher Ashford and Cecil Ford were both selected for the combined Devon & Cornwall XV to face the touring All Blacks. Talent was there in the Exeter ranks but it was not always put to good use.

The season began in earnest in disappointing fashion with three consecutive defeats. At home to Bridgwater & Albion, the selection committee was criticised for "tinkering with the backs" amongst whom there were some new players. Dick Madge played a heroic game behind "a spasmodic set of forwards". The result still came as a surprise (3-10). Sidmouth deserved their home victory in a midweek game when Exeter's only score came in the last minute of the game (4-6). Paying their first visit to Taunton's new ground at Priory Park, where 924 spectators had paid admission, Exeter could not manage a single score to match the home team's four tries (0-14). Ford, Ashford and George Palmer were absent assisting Devon in a county friendly.

An away mid-week victory at Paignton saw the start of a run of five consecutive wins – easily the best sequence of the season. The first victory was a narrow one after Exeter, having held the upper hand, almost succumbed to a determined rally by a team that had been reduced

to fourteen men early in the game (14-13). At home against Wellington three days later, with the forwards on top, the margin was much more comfortable (20-5).

The tussle with Barnstaple in north Devon was made all the more strenuous by torrential rain and a heavy pitch. Nevertheless the Exeter backs “got in some delightful runs”. After Exeter scored a try in the first half the two touch judges could not agree about the success of the conversion kick. The referee agreed with the Exeter official. Barnstaple who had won their previous five matches penned the visitors in their own 25 for the last ten minutes of the game and managed to register a try. The attempted conversion hit an upright and stayed out (5-3). Luck was on the citizens’ side.

Exeter ran riot at the County Ground against Old Haileyburians. Leading by only five points at half time the home team showed much better combination on the resumption and put on a brilliant display with Cecil Ford scoring four tries and sixteen points in all in a runaway victory (37-0).

Rugby in Newton Abbott had met with a crisis in the close season with the result that the “All Whites” went into a period of abeyance. Their fixtures were undertaken by an organisation called Newton Casuals. On their first appearance at the County Ground the Casuals took the lead. Exeter equalised in another unimpressive first half performance. Playing much better on the resumption another four tries were registered. None of Exeter’s five touch downs was converted (15-3).

The run of successes came to an abrupt end with a disappointing display at the Rectory against a Devonport Services side said to be missing some eleven regulars. Exeter actually led by a Sid Waller penalty at half time. Chances did arise but the team failed to take them. Generally the forwards were let down by the backs. Services scored all their points in the final quarter (3-12).

Worse was to follow. On the first Saturday in November Exmouth registered a surprise win at the County Ground in a game of contrasts. Passages of individual brilliance were interspersed a general “rough and tumble”. The home pack heeled from most of the scrums to give the backs plenty of opportunities especially at the start of the game but these were all bungled. After a scoreless first half Exmouth soon took the lead when a penalty try was awarded to them following which Exeter tired noticeably. Their sole try came right at the end (3-11).

A trip to Clifton was met by a familiar response when six selected players cried off. Their replacements included some 3rd team players. Matters were not improved by an injury to winger Phil Paul but after a spell off the field he resumed and scored a try. After a scoreless first half the home team edged the game (6-8).

Punctuating a run of what was to become six defeats came victory in a mid-week game against the 3rd Signals Regiment (Bulford). In wretched conditions Exeter outclassed their military opponents. For once the backs performed well and winger Gerald Pincott scored three tries (30-0).

Two home defeats by local opponents saw a return to the poor form by the three-quarters that blighted the team during the season. Against Teignmouth, it was reported that “Exeter had an off day” and “their outsiders have rarely given a worse performance”. Moreover tackling lapses contributed to their downfall. A heavier visiting pack carried the day (0-9).

The following week before a large crowd the Exeter backs again failed in attack showing little thrust. Even so it was said that “much against the run of play Torquay Athletic was lucky to win” (0-5). The last Saturday in November was blank due to a waterlogged pitch at Newton Abbot.

A visit to Bridgend on the first Saturday in December yet again found several senior players choosing not to travel. Many of the absentees remained at home to play against Sidmouth. In front of a crowd of 2,000 “the two teams, each intent upon playing a fast, open game, sustained interest to the end”. The game was not as one sided as the score suggests but Bridgend profited from Exeter errors (3-26).

Although described as a disappointing game Exeter, at home, did manage to defeat Taunton on a day when both teams were affected by county calls (8-3). To follow, what would have been a stiff task against Metropolitan Police, was, perhaps fortunately, avoided due to a frost bound ground.

Boxing Day opposition at the County Ground was provided by Exmouth. In a scrappy game Exeter started well but again faded in the second half. The club was fortunate to win by two penalty goals to a try (6-3). Continuing the holiday fixtures, a weak Exeter side had an “uneasy time” against an Old Heleans team that included several first-class players and just managed to scrape a draw (3-3). A New Year’s Day game against Blundell’s Squirrels was cancelled as the ground had become unfit for play.

The resumption of more demanding games in the New Year found Exeter performing badly and being unable to win a game during January. Still at home the club suffered its biggest defeat of the season to date when facing Devonport Services. The familiar story of defensive weakness and the inability to stay the course after half time meant that a lead of a penalty goal was more than overcome by the visitors who scored five tries in the last half hour (3-19).

On their own ground Teignmouth achieved a double over their city rivals but Exeter was a little unfortunate as three tries were scored against two and the conversion of Teignmouth’s second try won the match (11-13). Still away from home Exeter suffered another heavy defeat, this time at Beacon Park against Plymouth Albion, in incessant rain that made playing conditions gruelling. Exeter had been deprived of the services of Sid Waller at full-back due to a motor-cycle accident the previous evening. Albion was more unfortunate as they lost their stand-off early in the game due to injury. Reduced to seven in number the home pack still dominated and Exeter was overwhelmed (6-27). The match was witnessed by 5-600 spectators when once the crowd might once have been 5-6,000 in number.

Following a directive from the Rugby Football Union all games scheduled for the last Saturday in January were postponed due to the death of King George V. Exeter had been scheduled to visit Torquay Athletic.

For the next game the County Ground yet again resembled a quagmire and conditions were not improved by rain falling throughout the match. A second narrow win of the season over Barnstaple was recorded. After several disjointed efforts a headline proclaimed “Exeter Forwards Magnificent”. A Harold Gayton penalty goal provided the only score of the game but it gained Exeter its first victory since Boxing Day (3-0).

The improvement did not last despite the fact that Exeter, at home, fielded what was thought to be their strongest team of the season, with the forwards being the heavier of the two packs on the field. Opponents, Weston super Mare, was regarded by some as one of the strongest teams in the country at the time. "Exeter flattered to deceive" as the Weston forwards were faster in the loose and their backs cleverer. The winning score came late in the game (3-8).

"Exeter Harass Albion" was one verdict on the home game against their rivals from Plymouth but, in a game of spoiling tactics, the Exeter backs again lacked penetration. Cecil Ford, coming into the team as a late replacement on the wing, was injured during the game. The margin between a draw and victory was a failed conversion attempt that hit an upright (3-3).

A side that contained a weakened back division including a third choice full back travelled to the Royal Naval Engineering College and was defeated (5-10) before a mid-week encounter with the Combined Colleges was postponed due to a waterlogged pitch.

As was now the norm a weakened team was sent to London to face Woodford. Even so the team did not play up to expectations (0-16).

The rescheduled mid-week match with Combined Colleges resulted in an expected win. For some unexplained reason Exeter chose to play a 5/8th back system in the fashion of the New Zealand touring team. The trial was said to be only a partial success (16-3).

At Wellington the heavier Exeter pack was outplayed in the loose but did better in the scrums thus allowing scrum-half Madge to set up the three-quarters who yet again showed a lack of thrust. The backs were unable to score and it was left to forward Colin Paul to score Exeter's only try (3-3).

Predictably Exeter did not fare well in South Wales against Bridgend though the team did perform better than expected (3-13) against the same XV that had recently defeated Swansea. For the next away game the destination was only as far away as Exmouth where in a keen contest containing much spoiling by wing-forwards honours ended even (0-0).

Two poor performance were to follow. At Paignton the game was marred by kick and rush tactics with "the second half is best forgotten" (3-6). Then came the heaviest defeat of the season at Redruth when the home side scored eight tries to Exeter's one. The Devon newspapers described the Exeter team as "a makeshift side" (6-34).

The pre-Easter mid-week match at Tiverton brought some respite, winger Phil Paul scoring three tries (11-3). Easter Saturday visitors, Old Blues, found themselves three points behind up to the last twenty minutes whereupon they scored eleven points without reply. The Exeter backs lacked cohesion (3-11).

Old Edwardians from Birmingham having cried off substitute opposition was found in the form of Middlesex Hospital for the Easter Monday game. In recognition of their services to the first XV during the season the captaincy of the team was given to Phil Paul while his younger brother Colin was to lead the forwards. Maybe this move galvanised the team into a more effective unit when, what was described as a "typical Easter XV" reversed one of the trends of the season and came good in the last quarter of the game. Harold Gayton, son of the Lord Mayor, kicked three penalty to add to a try and a dropped goal (16-3).

Tuesday visitors Leicester provided the usual difficult opposition. Exeter did play better than in the corresponding fixture the previous season and managed to register four tries. Leicester, who included four internationals in their ranks, nevertheless won comfortably (12-24).

Exeter was at far from full strength for the next game at Bridgwater & Albion whose backs proved to be the faster and cleverer thus outplaying the visitors. Five players were making their first appearance of the season at first team level and usual scrum half Dick Madge was assigned a berth in the centre (8-10).

The season was extended to allow fixtures postponed on the death of the King to be fulfilled. At Torquay Athletic the two teams played out a dull end of season game (3-3).

As reported at the Annual General Meeting, the season was “only a fair one” that caused general disappointment. Players had apparently already shown their dissatisfaction by what was termed an act of dissent. Frank Buckland reported at the A.G.M. that playing members had held secret meetings off the club premises with a view to pooling votes to prevent certain committee members from being re-elected. It was alleged that they thought certain appointed members were not capable of running the club. Buckland stated that there were “a few malcontents who had been a soured of worry to the committee”. “We would welcome players of all classes” and there would be “no cliquing””. The use of this phrase echoed Exeter’s problems in the early 1890s. This time it appeared that the discontent by some players stemmed from the fact that if a first team vacancy occurred the position was not always filled by an equivalent player from the Harlequins XV.

Secretary Jack Coombes had attended the secret meeting and defended the players’ right to free speech. He added that the foreseen problem lay with selection and the players were not displaying disloyalty to the club. The “conflict” evaporated soon after.

The number of teams being run each week had been reduced from four to three.

At the A.G.M. of the Devon Rugby Referees Society it was declared that should a game be late in starting the referee may go home. Apparently Exeter was one of the worst offender regarding late starts.