



A WINNING CULTURE

THE LAST TIME I PLAYED RUGBY ALONGSIDE Rob Baxter, we trudged off the pitch exhausted and caked in mud, our side having lost narrowly in the Devon under 19s county cup final.

Playing for our sixth-form college team in front of a small crowd on that rain-drenched evening at the County Ground, the then-ramshackle home of Exeter Rugby Club, was to be a highlight of my rugby playing days.

Baxter, on the other hand, would go on to captain Exeter as the club made a gradual ascent from the third tier of English rugby, successfully navigating a tricky period when the sport turned from fully amateur to professional. And then, as head of the coaching team, he would lead the side into the top league, the Premiership, to become champions of England and Europe.

It is one of the most unlikely sporting success stories. The equivalent in soccer would be a club such

ROB BAXTER,
Director of
Rugby at Exeter
Chiefs, explains
how a shift in
culture helped
to turn his team
from plucky
underdogs into
the champions
of England and
Europe in 2020.

as Le Havre in France or Duisburg in Germany winning the Champions league; or in American football, the Arizona Cardinals becoming serial Super Bowl winners.

Because as we were growing up in the 1980s, Exeter was very much a backwater in English rugby.

Our schools focused on soccer, so from around the age of 10, Baxter and I went to the only youth rugby club in the city of over 100,000 people and we still struggled to get enough players together on frosty Sunday mornings. We would go to watch rugby powerhouses such as Bath and Leicester play their second or third teams against Exeter and inflict heavy defeats. And when the Australian national side came to play at the County Ground in 1984, we could easily spot ourselves on TV in the sparse crowd. (As rugby fate would have it, I ended up playing against some of that long-retired Australian team in a Hong Kong tournament years later.)

From a sheep and cattle farming background,

Baxter, 50, puts Exeter's rise from relative obscurity down to a strong work ethic, and an evolution in organizational culture over several years, which turned the club from brave underdogs to feared and respected champions.

"The highest skill in leadership, team building and culture, is being able to read the scenario," Baxter said. "You can't just go through all these steps in a two- or three-month period. I look back and think, we really needed the time, that was a big thing."

Survival by Grace

The goal Baxter had as a coach when Exeter first climbed into the Premiership in 2010 was to ensure survival with largely the same group who had played at the lower level, while the club maintained strict financial discipline. Only by staying in the Premiership for three or four years would Exeter begin to receive from the league the level of pay-outs that established top clubs benefited from.

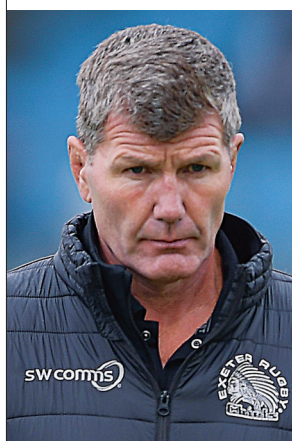
"There's nothing positive about saying you're going to avoid finishing last, and yet I was watching other teams say these things," Baxter recalled. "We made a decision to not talk about relegation, but to talk about all the good things we could get out of the year. We wanted to improve and get something out of every game. So we always managed to create a positive spin."

To synthesize this approach, the coaching team pinned signs proclaiming "ACE" around Exeter's new ground, Sandy Park, standing for "attitude, commitment, enjoyment." A year later, it grew to "GRACE" with the addition of "graft [hard work] and respect." The culture was based on making the very most of the areas that were in the team's control, for example, the intensity of training, ultimate fitness and retention of the ball for as long as possible, which could mean curbing adventure and risk-taking on the pitch.

The coaches imparted on the players that if they had worked hard during the week and played out the game plan at the weekend, "we can put our arms around each other in a huddle at the end of the game, and say we've done the best we can do, and we can move on," Baxter said.

"We can celebrate if it's good, but we won't get too down on it if it's bad," he added. "And that creates the kind of protection for what could be a fragile group if you are just based purely on avoiding relegation, which initially was our challenge."

Exeter surprised many by winning 10 matches in their inaugural Premiership season and finishing in 8th place of 12 teams, which remains their lowest placing over the last decade.



**EVERY PLAYER
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Playing for the youth rugby team in Exeter, circa 1981, Rob Baxter, back row, far right, and the author, front row, far left.

"It's All About ME"

The coaching team became known for a canny ability to spot potential in players in lower leagues or those who were rejected by other clubs, while taking the time to develop them into top performers. But Exeter also built a strong academy of up-and-coming young players, and a highly talented group—including Henry Slade, Jack Nowell, Luke Cowan-Dickie, Dave Ewers and Sam Hill—graduated from this system as the Club established itself in the Premiership.

Baxter sensed it was time for a change in tack and had one-on-one meetings with his players to discuss adopting a new approach to team culture.

"If your recruitment is good and your academy works well, you start getting players who want a bit more than being this kind of plucky team that wins more than people expect," he said. "History shows that those players migrate—whether it's in football, rugby, American football—to successful teams. And I wasn't going to stand here and go, it's OK to lose. Sooner or later, one, two or three of them would say, Leicester and Wasps seem to be able to win trophies, I want to do that and play for England."

After engaging with players on their personal goals and motivation, the "GRACE" signs were taken down and the team adopted "It's all about ME", broken down into three sub-components: My Energy, My Emotion, My Enjoyment.

Every player needed to understand their individual importance to the team, the responsibilities associated with that, and how to maximize their contribution. The idea was for the team to set ambitious goals and push each other to meet them.

"What would happen before was that it was kind of OK for the odd guy to be the weakest link of the chain, because if we lost a game, the team would look after him," Baxter said. "But that's almost the opposite of what you want. You want the team to set higher standards and demand more. You need everyone to understand there's nothing wrong with demanding more."

"The key isn't saying I expect you to work hard, it is to get the person to understand how important they are to the success of the team, and actually to want to be that person who's really important," he added. "We had to give people the 'why'. Why should I be the one who works flat out, when I can see that guy over there not doing the same? If you can get the guys to break that cycle, you're straight away on an upward curve."

And while the emphasis moved away from the collective to focus on the individual, the concept of "care" for teammates became central to the theme of

taking full responsibility for performance—despite being met by nervous smiles when originally introduced by Baxter to his squad of 45 players.

“If you’re a teammate of mine, if I care about you, in a sporting environment, I should train hard, get my diet right, do my weights, learn my calls, learn the patterns for the plays we’re going to use this week, do my preview on the opposition, be diligent,” Baxter said. “You have less chance of winning if I don’t do that. And as a teammate of mine, I should have the expectation that you will do the same. And so that’s how you care for each other, and that’s what makes you important.”

The shift in culture helped to catapult Exeter to the very top of European club rugby. The team have competed in the Premiership final in each of the last six seasons, winning it twice, and beat French side Racing 92 in a tense European final in 2020. Baxter received the honor of OBE (Order of the British Empire), after originally thinking the email was a prank, and is widely tipped as a future head coach of the England national side.

Legacy and Community

The challenge now is to continue to motivate a team that has already won the biggest prizes, and to create a legacy of sustained success. Baxter has been researching the New England Patriots and sitting with his squad to watch behind-the-scenes videos of the NFL team.

“One thing you see is when they’ve won back-to-back Super Bowls, individuals have had great seasons. And when two or three players have great seasons, it really motivates the whole side,” Baxter said. A prime example is Exeter forward Sam Simmonds, who has been overlooked by England coach Eddie Jones despite setting a league try-scoring record this year, but picked to represent the elite British and Irish Lions team to tour South Africa in July and August.

“You can almost see the team growing with Sam and driving him,” Baxter said. “We have talked quite a bit about how to live success through each other as a team. If I’m successful, I’m helping you be successful. And if you’re successful, I live part of that success with you. It’s a genuine thing that they can express joy and emotion and success through each other.”

A poll of player agents conducted in 2019 placed Exeter as the favored destination for players in the English Premiership, with one agent quoted as saying: “The culture that Rob Baxter has created there is a massive pulling factor,” while another polled said that there’s “a chance to win, there’s great coaching and they make you a better player.”



12 O'CLOCK HIGH...

is one of Rob Baxter's favorite films. The 1949 movie starts with a highly popular group commander whose men are losing several planes on every sortie and running dangerously low on morale. He is replaced by a stricter, colder man, played by Gregory Peck. The new commander isn't popular—he orders the bar closed and arranges extra practice in formation flying—but he is highly effective. Peck's character continues to fight the temptation to be chummy with his aircrews.

As Exeter Chiefs established themselves in the Premiership, Baxter has made a similar transition himself. As his relationship with players evolved, he urged them to watch *12 O'Clock High*. “You fly in formation, you protect each other, that’s what it’s like on a rugby field,” Baxter said. “Which formation do you want to fly in, where it’s OK to turn up late, OK not to train that hard, but you might get shot down? Or do you want to be in this one—where the responsibility is on you to know your roles, you get your training right? It’s about responsibility and caring. Some people think caring is lovely—it’s not always nice.”

However, Baxter admits it took time for his squad to buy into the change in culture at Exeter in recent years. Some players never did and have left the club.

“In the background of all this, as a leader you have to start with an expectation that people are good people,” Baxter said. “If you don’t start with that, there is no process you can put in place that will work. And then, you have to be prepared to be disappointed, sometimes on the journey as someone changes, and sometimes by people. An unwavering ability to be disappointed by some people is actually what will let you thrive and get the best out of people.”

Baxter, who I remember as a powerful presence on the pitch and a thoughtful voice in the changing room, talks frequently about a good coach and leader needing to be “emotive,” to be able to connect on an emotional level with a team, rather than “robotic and all about process.”

We think back to our former coach in our youth rugby days, Michael Browning, who now has a street in Exeter named after him for his contribution to the community. He kept our interest in rugby alive for years, visiting in the evenings to talk with our parents, and driving to our homes in the early morning in his rickety fishmonger’s van, making sure we could muster a full team for matches.

“Mike popping around Exeter in his van picking us up every weekend, when you think about it, it was incredible,” Baxter remembers. “He used to pick us all up, take us all around Devon, drop us all home. Incredible wasn’t it?”

What I also find amazing is that Exeter Chiefs have developed strong relationships across the region, and have become a focal point for communities. Some of the relatively obscure Devon clubs we used to play against as kids—Teignmouth, Ivybridge and Tiverton—have spawned current Exeter Chiefs and England international players. The college team Baxter and I played for on that damp evening in 1989 is now part of the academy system.

“The opportunity for career rugby is very slim, but the qualities of being part of a team and the enjoyment you can get out of rugby is there for everybody,” Baxter said. “That’s why I worry about what the pandemic might have done and how many clubs might be able to keep going. I don’t think it will impact the professional sphere, but there’s an awful lot of good that goes on, and a lot of people who find a place in life through sports like rugby.” ♦

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