

Lewis and Harris League:

Lochs 4 (3) Carloway 1 (0)

Calum "Stoon" Macleod 20 Kevin "Gochan" Macleod 79

Graeme Mackenzie 36

Don "Lava" Macleod 44

David Macmillan 90

At Sgoil nan Loch.

1.9.10

Ref.: Billy Macdonald

Gordon Craigie

Domhnall Mackay Calum Tom Moody (capt.) Seamus Macleod

Donnie Macphail Dan Crossley Kenny "Beag" MacIennan Benn Esslemont Gordon "Tago" Macdonald

Kevin Gochan" Macleod Archie Macdonald

Subs.used: Kevin Anderson (Benn Esslemont) 54

Yellow Cards: Domhnall Mackay 35.

It seemed strange, Carloway's first visit of the season to Sgoil nan Loch taking place on the final day of both clubs' season, with the hosts already confirmed Champions, the Blues a reasonable fourth. Not that Carloway would have settled for this in the early part of 2010, suffering a single defeat (and that an unlucky one, to Aths, in the ABC Cup) in their opening 12 games, a run which included what remains their finest display of the season, a stunning Coop victory, all be it on penalties, against the Claret and Blues in mid-May. However, their form began to unravel throughout the following month and by late July a flawless display from the men from Leurbost sent na Gormaich's season into freefall.

And now to Leurbost, on the back of a poor finishing run of three wins in ten outings; an intimidating prospect for most visitors, although the Blues might have reflected fondly on last season's incredible 2-1 Lewis Cup win on this ground, a creditable 4-4 League draw the year before, complete with last-minute Pongo equalizer; while erasing from the tape the 0-9 Coop Cup mauling in June 2009, and the bitterness of a last-minute League defeat nine days after their Lewis Cup joy. For the Blues, their iconic captain, Andrew "Tago" Maciver, was unfit (pulled stomach muscle), so Peter Dokus thought boldly outside the box: a high-risk tactic, with Seumas Macleod débating in a tall back three, and Benn Esslemont returning to maintain an essential 5-man midfield. Lochs' central bulwark, Robert Mackenzie, was absent, but this allowed a welcome appearance by Calum "Stoon" Macleod in central midfield.

The match opened explosively: immediately, a smart Blues' move led to Crossley firing just over from 12 metres; then Lochs stormed down the right and Nomie miscued a perfect cut-back, high and wide from the same distance. A free-kick on the right, 25 metres out, flew across the Carloway goal past everyone to Lava, ghosting in wide of any marker, but the flight and pace was awkward and he couldn't get enough on its first bounce to stop it flying past left. A Macphail corner on the right ping-ponged around the face of

the Lochs goal, with neither Moody nor Macdonald able to get a clean touch, before being booted out for another corner. Then yet another flowing Lochs attack, this time left, led to a Peter Mackenzie strike, from 16 metres on the right, being deflected for a corner.

Hectic stuff, but despite Crossley coming close, meeting a glorious Esslemont diagonal from 22 metres out on the left, with a reverse header from 8 metres past Houston, only to see a covering defender somehow knee it on to the bar and away, the usual dilemmas for Lochs' opponents were becoming increasingly apparent: when they come at you, do you go for man-for-man, or stay zonal? Adopt the former and your shape disappears rapidly: David Martin covers the entire Lochs' left flank but, as often, lays off and moves in to the edge of the box: should the right back follow? Lava will then drift left or Nomie race left: should your main stoppers follow? This would leave your central defence empty for David Martin, David Macmillan, and Andy Murray to rush in, with Peter Mackenzie coming though, at the back end of the line on the far side, as he had just done. It's a Lochs' feature: a man drifting off at the back end of the line at cross balls, usually Lava left, Mackenzie right.

Carloway appeared to choose the zonal approach. but it still didn't stop the opener, when Murray was supplied and entered their box, right. He was surrounded, delayed, turned, and turned, then slipped it left to "Stoon" coming in to slide it left across Craigie and inside the far post. Experts make things seem astonishingly simple. Moments later, a Peter Mackenzie header from a corner was tipped over, before Carloway managed to retaliate with a Gochan shot palmed past and a Moody header over from the resultant corner.

However, a disputed free-kick, centrally, 22 metres out, led to number 2, chipped in, cleared, chipped in again, breaking left for Lava to hook across goal for Graeme Mackenzie to reach back, 6 metres out and head home. Two minutes later a Macleod screamer from 30 metres, out on the left touchline, was spilled by Houston, then palmed away for a corner at the second attempt, in what was effectively na Gormaich's last chance of the half. Not Lochs' though. Lava was immediately freed down the left but his early squared cross was too soon for his support, but just on half-time the surge was on the right, and the early diagonal from 25 metres saw the same striker racing behind the defence to convert from 16 metres with trademark ease.

Imagining the respective half-time team talks would be interesting: Robert Mackenzie's might simply have been, *"More of the same, but keep watching Gochan and Tago"*. What would Dokus say? How do you combat a technique that is terrifyingly simple: Martin, for instance, will bring the ball down left and will simultaneously lay the ball forward, short diagonally to Nomie, say, while he turns right and in; Nomie reverse passes it back to him, as he rapidly loses his minder and he quick flicks it onward again, say, to Lava who has moved left and forward to cross to Martin who has reached the centre by this time to convert, Nomie behind/ beyond him having circled behind and round and in also, while Murray and Macmillan have come through the centre, and Peter Mackenzie on the far side, etc.?

Also, Carloway's problem in midfield: despite Kenny "Beag's" and Esslemont's and Crossley's best combative efforts, they could not engage

with Murray and Macmillan, who, like good teachers, avoided direct confrontation and played around them. Hitler's blitzkrieg on the Eastern front aimed to seize territory and ignored cities, leaving their populations to starve in isolation. Why waste time taking out enemies who do not affect ultimate victory? Hence, the Blues' midfield here were left like inconsequential islands as a blitzkrieg of claret and blue swirled around them and impelled the Maroons forward.

Any time Carloway have actually lived with Lochs has been mainly due to playing to their perceived strengths, unmindful of opposition personnel, i.e. determinedly holding the back-line; obsessive holding of the ball; no long diagonals to find forwards/ wingers 40 metres away; and very careful passing to feet while facing forward. Wing-men like Tago and Gochan must be supplied with, not search for, balls in front of them to run, not drop back and turn, and this, in turn, supports lone or dual strikers, like Archie Uibhisteach, with Crossley, Macleod, or Anderson.

Ten minutes' apparent success persuaded Dokus to up the ante: Esslemont was sacrificed for Anderson's height and weight to support the isolated Macdonald up front, forcing the Mackenzies to abandon a high back-line because of Anderson's nuisance-value. It proved a master stroke. Immediately, on 58 minutes, Gochan broke well on the right but Anderson and Macdonald were unable to force his low cross home. Carloway now had their best spell, holding the ball, passing it round, looking for the opening, while denying Lochs their traditional regular surges. Houston had to touch away a Tago corner, before Moody headed over from a Macleod free-kick 22 metres out on the right.

However, Lochs may no longer have been rampant but they were still dangerous; a brilliant saving Macleod tackle preventing Peter Mackenzie converting on 78 minutes. Just as it seemed Carloway were reading from ***Zen and the Art of Football, the aim is not to score; but to see how closely you can miss*** Gochan scored the most curious of goals. Seumas Macleod won the ball in central defence and surged forward rightwards, laying off the ball to Gochan on the centre line; Gochan, in turn, surged forward past several defenders, acquiring a following of Maroons like a comet's tail. On the edge of the box, just as he seemed to have overrun the ball, he struck a low left-foot shot which Houston got his left hand to but couldn't keep out.

Now Carloway pushed: on 85 minutes a Macphail corner on the left was twice cleared off the line, and moments later, Macdonald was blocked, on the end of a Gochan run and cross. But the last laugh fell to Lochs when a re-taken free-kick out on Carloway's right was headed home by Macmillan under the bar. And it could have been worse for the Blues as Lava miskicked the final ball on a forward run, deep in injury-time.

2010 has witnessed numerous commentators, mainly resident in the Coll, Back, and Tong areas, suggesting the men from Leurbost are in decline. Well, when Lochs compete with Carloway, they must be acting out of character! Even in the Coop game at Cnoc a' Choilich, they had numerous chances to bury na Gormaich, before Donnie Macphail bundled in the last-minute saver for the Blues. How could such remarks be true, anyway, of a team with the two best midfielders on the island, in Macmillan and Murray; three of the best

forwards in David Martin, Lava, and Nomie; the best holding midfielder and right wing-back in Robert and Peter Mackenzie respectively, and one of the best central defenders in Graeme Mackenzie?

Carloway can take some consolation from the fact they fought hard not to be swamped in the first half and were a little unlucky at times, and had a grip on proceedings in large parts of the second, against a team of this calibre. The back three held firm throughout, with Seumas Macleod a revelation as stopper, while Kenny Beag and Dan Crossley persevered in a hostile environment, coming good in the second half, where, in partnership with the emerging creativity of Macphail, they supplied the game-changing running of Tago and Gochan; the arrival of Kevin Anderson helped keep Lochs at bay also, as, up front, as a foil to the tireless Archie Macdonald, he formed a partnership to alleviate constant forward pressure from the Champions, and this, in turn, allowed Dan Crossley forward breaks to supplement the new front two.

Congratulations, Lochs! Worthy Champions!

And Carloway: "*Think not of those times past, but of the glories yet to come!*"

Lochs Man of the Match: Andy Murray.

Carloway Man of the Match: Seumas Macleod.