

Lewis & Harris League:

Carloway 4 (1) Lochs 1 (0)

Andrew "Tago" Maciver 17, 69 Andy Murray 84

Seumas Macleod 65

Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod 75

At Cnoc a' Choilich.

Friday, 15.4.10

Ref.: D.J. Maclean

Gordon Craigie

Andrew "Tago" Maciver Calum Tom Moody Domhnall Mackay Donald "D.I." MacIennan

Darren Mackinnon Seumas Macleod Donnie Macphail Murdo "Squeg" Macleod (capt.) Gordon "Tago" Macdonald

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Subs.: Archie Macdonald (Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald) 71; Billy Anderson (Seumas Macleod) 84;

Calum Macleod (Gordon "Tago" Macdonald) 89.

According to the Gazette, this was to be the first defining League contest of the season, the reigning champions against their main pretenders, though, hopefully, the Carloway players are not ardent students of history: apart from one or two hiccups on Cup duty, the last time Lochs failed to record a League win at Cnoc a' Choilich was in a 1-1 draw in May, 1995, with Carloway's last League victory the preceding season, 2-1, in July; also, Lochs had not failed to score here on League duty in the last 30 years. It's uncertain whether awareness of this would induce inspiration or depression: the absence of David Martin for the Maroons might have provoked the former, the appearance of David Macmillan the latter. Kenny "Beag" was unavailable for the Blues and the managerial team opted to start with what appeared like a solitary Kenny "Dokus" up front (no doubt mindful of his sparkling second-half performance versus United), and flood the midfield with the inclusion of Seumas Macleod and Donnie Macphail; Archie Macdonald and Billy Anderson dropped to the bench, alongside Andrew "V.P." Macleod, Calum Macleod, and Kevin "Barra" Macneil.

It's debatable whether or not the teams believed the pre-match hype although there was healthy respect for each other throughout. Carloway came out of the blocks towards Lochs, forcing the initial tempo, with "Dokus" especially bright and slippery, leaving the Mackenzies initially uncertain whether to track or shield; Lochs, in turn, let na Gormaich pant and come, confident that Murray-Macmillan-Lava-Nomie, backed by Peter and Robert Mackenzie, would eventually deliver. An early series of dangerous inswinging corners from "Tago" and Macphail sharpened Black's reflexes as he moved admirably to claw or punch away each in turn close under his bar, though Craigie in his turn had to remain alert to beat to his right an awkward Macmillan drive from 22 metres.

Then, an early game-changer for the Blues: Robert Mackenzie was adjudged to have bundled Seumas Macleod midway within the Lochs half, towards the left; "Sqweg" stepped up and sent in a vicious chest-high right-footer through the central defence which eluded the stretching Calum Moody and skided back off the chest of the unnerved David Black to a charging Pongo, who did not hesitate and thundered a right-foot drive high to Black's right.

Immediately a chance materialised at the other end: Craigie raced from his goal to boot clear from the chasing Lava but the ball ricocheted off the forward and broke behind Craigie to his left; Lava pounced to convert but a retreating Mackay just managed to get back in time to boot the ball away for a corner.

A minute later an exquisite Robert Mackenzie cross ball from midfield set up a move down the right but Macmillan skied the cut-back from the 18 metre line. Then Peter Mackenzie broke right to square across goal but Robert Mackenzie could not get a clean connect; in the resulting scramble Nomie was blocked, then Lava, then the ball cleared hurriedly for a corner on the right. The sleeping giant had certainly been wakened now as Lochs threatened repeatedly; Calum Tom did respond with a header just over from a Tago corner on 25 minutes, but the traffic was now increasingly one-way: a moment later a Murray break sent Nomie down the left but Lava was unable to force the ball home and Craigie pawed it away. Lava was to break once again on the right on 40 minutes but again Craigie blocked, then just on half-time the striker was inches too late to meet an excellent Peter Mackenzie cut-back from the bye-line.

The men from Leurbost must have wondered over their half-time oranges what exactly they had to do to score, but it did not seem to dampen their resolve and they continued to press the Blues. Suddenly the breakthrough seemed to have appeared: after Craigie saved well at the feet of an onrushing attacker, on 51 minutes a corner on the left broke out but was driven back in; there was a mad scramble on the 6-metre box before Lava forced it home, but he (or someone else in the melée) was ruled offside. Full marks to the Maroons, however: self-belief, perhaps a sense of injustice, kept them pressing. First Robert Mackenzie was blocked on 22 metres, then Andy Murray; a colossal Graeme Mackenzie free-kick from the right centre-line was pushed over by Craigie, before the arrival of a classic breakaway goal, which all dominant teams dread.

On 65 minutes, Carloway, who seemed to have taken heart from their success in frustrating Lochs, broke suddenly down the left and a deep "Sqweg" cross carried over a scant defensive line for Seumas Macleod to ghost in centrally and glance the ball, just inside Black's left-hand post.

Five minutes later the contest was over: from the centre circle, Macphail fed Mackinnon right. He, in turn, sent Pongo off down the right; his cut -back was only half-cleared and "Dokus" got it back to Macleod who fired it back in low. 12 metres out, Tago turned to whack it home but Black saved superbly to his left at point-blank range yet couldn't prevent Pongo following up to convert.

What is the best approach in such circumstances? Batten down the hatches or go for broke? Lochs chose the latter and continued their patient build-up from midfield, through the artistry of Andy Murray and the industry of David Macmillan and Robert Mackenzie, but were caught once again when Graeme Mackenzie tried to play his way out of defence and was robbed by "Sqweg", who ran on to chip the ball over the advancing keeper from 18 metres. On 84 minutes Lochs were finally rewarded for their efforts when a Macmillan reverse pass freed Murray on the left of the box to sweep the ball low across Craigie and inside his left-hand post. And still they came

forward, but were left open once more when Mackinnon and Archie Macdonald were sent clear, 2-on-1, on Graeme Mackenzie. Mackinnon drew Mackenzie and Black well before sending the ball across to an unmarked Macdonald just moving inside the box, but he had already stepped a metre forward to receive and was, of course, offside.

Sometimes it's dangerous to want something too much; once you have it, you can be unsure what you should do with it. Carloway have wanted for so long to establish their credentials, preferably with a victory over the best team on the island. Lochs are a measure against which to judge your own worth. Now the Blues have achieved it, what does it mean? They have to remember that they "have scotched the snake, not kill'd it." It will "close and be herself whilst our poor malice remains in danger of her former tooth".

Lochs will remember this evening well, we can be sure. Of course, the usual Greek chorus of Cassandras will now start foretelling the end of the "Lochs era". Yet the scoreline masks a quite different reality: na Gormaich opened well, ran things for the opening 20 minutes, then defended doggedly for the next 50 minutes, then took their few chances expertly when they arrived - "Sqweg's" goal was a joy; yet Lochs, apart from the last 20 minutes, always seemed to be about to get back into it, and, in fact, controlled the pattern of the game for nearly 50 minutes. If the "offside goal" had stood, what would have happened next? What we saw was an efficient enough Leurbost outfit that simply needs some fine tuning, a bit of calibration, and the war machine will return as deadly as ever; Lava, Nomie, and David Macmillan didn't seem to have their usual edge - yet.

Macmillan was still a towering presence throughout, but the brilliance of Andy Murray couldn't carry the centre alone. David Martin was missed also and this, in turn, allowed Pongo to burst down the right frequently, to devastating effect. The Blues must be well-satisfied with this performance: every cylinder fired reliably for 90 minutes; no malfunctions. Initial misgivings about "Dokus" solitary up front proved groundless, as he was a constant pain in the tonsils for the Lochs defence and on the ball, his control, distribution, and attempts on goal, were exemplary. "Sqweg" has metamorphosed into Braveheart since assuming the captaincy and led by example, with outstanding assistance from Seumas Macleod and Darren Mackinnon; while the Gneissian rock at the back, the Craigie-Moody-Mackay triumvirate, proved decisive under pressure, considering they had to remain on-call for most of the game. No slack periods in this game for any participants!

Lochs Man of the Match: Andy Murray.

Carloway Man of the Match: Gordon Craigie.