

Lewis & Harris League:

Athletic 2 (0) Carloway 3 (2)

Scott Maciver 75, 88

Donnie Macphail 30, 34

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 69

At Goathill Park

Monday, 2.5.11

Ref.: Billy Macdonald.

Gordon Craigie

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

Dan Crossley Donnie Macphail Murdo "Squeg" Macleod (capt.) Darren Mackinnon

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Kevin "Gochan" Macleod

Subs.: Archie Macdonald (Kevin "Gochan" Macleod) 49; Billy Anderson (Donnie Macphail) 85; Calum Macleod (Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald) 85.

Yellow Card: Donnie Macphail 36.

In League campaigns it's always best to face your demons early, especially if your initial form is promising. If you lose, well, it's over; you didn't expect to win anyway and you still have most of the season to recover. If you win, wow! You're really going places this year. Only one defeat had come Carloway's way so far in 2011: on this same ground, against this same team, administered by the very same player who was to lead the charge against the Blues tonight. It's dangerous to start talking about a "bogey" team or a "bogey" ground, otherwise you might create your own self-perpetuating myth, but the circumstances surrounding tonight's clash didn't suggest a whole lot of fun awaited the Blues. The managerial team opted for a little fine tuning to Saturday's Coop victors, with David Beaton and Archie Macdonald dropping to the bench alongside Billy Anderson, Calum Macleod, and Andrew "V.P." Macleod, and this allowed Gordon Craigie to return in goal, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald to move forward to partner Kevin "Gochan" Macleod up front, and Dan Crossley to slot in in a forcing role on the right of midfield.

Aths started briskly, wrong-footing Carloway immediately with their customary aggressive pace and spread out of midfield, stretching the back four, and discomfiting the centre. Scott Maciver dropped deep, setting Domhnall Mackay - and "Sqweg" - a dilemma: should Mackay follow, leaving a back three to deal with Jones and partner (not to mention Scott Macaulay on the left) then hope he can match him for pace, in his trademark bursts forward on goal? Or leave Maciver to "Sqweg" and keep the back-line solid? The choice of the latter as chief marker, however, threatened to make Carloway's main ball-winner slightly less effective in midfield, leaving the creativity of Macphail under-supplied and the pace of Mackinnon and Crossley under-used.

As it happened, Robert Jones, as main striker, turned out to be every bit as troublesome as Maciver, in a different way, frequently dragging Mackay back and left, in the initial surges, hence putting additional weight on Calum Moody to dominate the middle, as "Tago" was fully occupied by a combative Macaulay on the left, anxious to be involved in the action. This initial uncertainty presented the Stornoway men with three early golden opportunities: on 2 minutes a break on the right led to an attempted Mackay clearance inside the box rebounding off an Athletic man to Macaulay, whose low shot from 12 metres was blocked by Craigie's right-foot and spun away high for a corner. A moment later a Nic Davis drive from 22

metres thudded against the bar; on 6 minutes another swift move down the right saw a squared attempt from the bye-line to supply Jones coming back off a heel across goal to an onrushing Maciver on the left, but his snatched shot sliced well-wide of Craigie's right-hand post.

On 15 minutes another Maciver attempt from 23 metres was expertly clawed away by Craigie for a corner to his left. It was 21 minutes before the Blues' first serious attempt on goal: a beautifully-flighted "Sqweq" free-kick 25 metres out on the right was met by "Gochan" running across the defensive line but he'd over-anticipated slightly so had to stretch back to head and it went well-wide. Craigie smothered yet another long-range Maciver shot, before a heart-stopping moment arrived for na Gormaich: Craigie rushed from his goal to gather a high-bouncing Aths clearance into his area, but came too far, and as the ball bounced high over him, Davis rushed on to it, pressured by Moody, who forced him wide. However, as Davis momentarily considered his options, everyone noticed the offside flag was up.

Not surprisingly, lack of a breakthrough seemed to be deflating Aths slightly, and Carloway gradually began to initiate sweeping moves forward. On the half-hour "Gochan" broke clear in the middle, fed "Dokus" right, and his immediate pass onward, diagonally left behind the retreating back-line, found a breaking Macphail slip the ball exquisitely beyond Maciver from 16 metres. Right away, the home team had a chance to equalise: a corner from the right was met by the head of Davis at the far post, inside the 6-metre area, but a combination of Craigie and a defender managed to block and the rebound bobbled past off Davis. The resulting goal-kick out was met by "Gochan" in the centre, midway in the Athletic half, and his back-header under pressure found an unmarked "Dokus" running free on the right; his cut-back from close to the bye-line was met perfectly by an inrushing Macphail in front of goal to convert from 8 metres.

It's a rather demoralising, but frequent, experience, to set the pace in a game of football and then find yourselves two goals down at the break. It didn't seem to dishearten Athletic, though, and they began the second half, as they had begun the first. An initial flurry by na Gormaich, in which Crossley just failed to connect with a vicious low cross from the right, was followed by a Jones break on the left; crowded out by a raft of defenders, he still managed to squeeze in a low shot from a difficult angle which went past, off the base of the post.

On 62 minutes, a Macphail free-kick from 25 metres just cleared the bar, but the earlier withdrawal of "Gochan" seemed to have weakened Carloway's impact up front, and an understandable drift backwards seemed to be occurring. On 66 minutes a Scott Maciver free-kick from the left corner of the box was saved carefully by Craigie, off his chest. However, a classic sucker punch on 69 minutes appeared to have finished the game: a Maciver dribble through the middle was blocked; the ball broke to Moody and his elegant flighted pass left, worthy of Ronald de Boer, found Darren Mackinnon bursting free down the left; his pinpoint cross, in turn, behind the rapidly retreating Clinton, Maciver, and Macrae, was met perfectly on the bounce, 8 metres out, directly in front of goal, by the right foot of "Dokus", sliding in to ram it home. One of the best worked goals Carloway have ever scored - and beautifully taken!

The Blues seemed quite clearly now to settle for what they had, and defence was obviously the preferred option. After all, they had weathered everything Aths had thrown at them; they had broken well from defence to score three well-worked goals.

Why should things change? It wasn't pleasant to watch, but seemed to be the wise choice, as they denied real scoring opportunities to the opposition; that is, until the 75th minute, when their old *bête noire* finally managed to gain an edge. A Maciver free-kick, 20 metres out on the left of the box, seemed to have been gathered awkwardly by Craigie, high to his right, but he only succeeded in pushing the ball into the corner of his net. Game on!

With Scott Maciver now moving forward, to form a three-pronged attack against a retreating Carloway back-line, and perhaps gain an unlikely draw for Athletic, the local team swept forward; Carloway met them, head-on. On 85 minutes, Jones fed Maciver breaking left, but his hooked left-foot shot rattled Craigie's right-hand post, before spinning across an empty box devoid of takers. Three minutes later, Maciver again forced himself through on the left, jostling with Mackay for the ball, before knocking it across Craigie and inside the far post, as "Tago" rushed to block him. A bad goal for Carloway to lose, at a bad time. Athletic now had the bit between their teeth; however, continued all-out aggression, in a game now taking place almost totally in the Blues' half, provided them with no further clear-cut opportunities, despite na Gormaich having to endure 6 minutes of added-on time!

3-2 certainly is a closer reflection of the balance of the game than 3-0. Most island games do seem to have little between the sides, with results decided by a bit of inspiration here, a chance well-taken there; a bit of luck, good or bad, and so on. As was this match: two teams competing hard, and for the bulk of the time negating the enterprise of their opponents, while occasionally constructing the odd inspired move themselves, from an insightful pass/break, dead-ball situation, etc. Not the best game ever played but there was plenty of courage and commitment on display.

As in the ABC Cup, Athletic were a forceful presence, especially in midfield, where the drive of Nic Davis and the constructive effort and bursts of Scott Maciver, led to all sorts of unpredictable problems for Carloway at the back, especially in the first and last quarters of the game. Carloway's back four, however, held firm until the last 15 minutes, when, perhaps, a subconscious feeling that the game was more or less won may have crept in. The tactics changed noticeably from *clear-the-decks-at-all-costs-sit-on-Scott* mode to a holding *European-Champions-away-game* style and balls which previously had been headed or flighted forward immediately were allowed to bounce, were chested sideways, or passed along the back. Extreme care is needed with such an approach; not always easy when you have players like Scott Maciver, Robert Jones, and Scott Macaulay snapping around; thus it led to trouble when, having survived the opening Aths storm, creative attacking play, involving Macphail, Mackinnon, "Gochan", and "Dokus" should have had them home and dry.

Athletic Man of the Match: Nic Davis (First Half); Scott Maciver (Second Half).

Carloway Man of the Match: Donnie Macphail.