

Highland Amateur Cup Semi-Final:

Avoch 3 (1)

Paul Brindle (pen.) 5, 51

Darren Mackinnon (o.g.) 76

Carloway 1 (1)

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 16

Referee: Robert Mackay.

At Morefield Park, Ullapool.

Saturday, 23rd July, 2011.

Gordon Craigie ☒

Andrew "Tago" Maciver Domhnall Mackay ☒ Calum Tom Moody Darren

Mackinnon

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Dan Crossley Seumas Macleod Murdo "Sqweg"

Macleod (capt.) Gordon "Tago" Macdonald

Chris Macleod

Subs.: David Beaton (Gordon Craigie) 9; Donnie Macphail (Seumas Macleod) 73;

Archie Macdonald (Chris Macleod) 73.

Yellow cards: Gordon Craigie 5; Domhnall Mackay 75.

Outside Morefield Park, the message board of Loch Broom Free Church posed the question, "*Is there a point to life?*" Passers-by were then encouraged to enter and discuss. After this afternoon's events in Ullapool, many associated with Carloway might have been tempted by this invitation, subtly altered, perhaps, to, "*Is there a point to football?*" No doubt, the minister within advises calm reflection - before and after events - as the fundamental key to fulfilment: confront; think things through; remember; call it "Experience".

Unfortunately, football is regularly outwith these parameters. "*A whole new ball game*", as Graham Taylor might have said. An ability to learn from experience is certainly beneficial: having done it all before (Avoch'06, '07; Back in '04) endows a certain assurance on a club: "*We can do it. Hey, we've done it all before!*", whereas sides experiencing such heady heights for the first time (Carloway; Wick Groats) must wonder if that final step is ever possible. Former winners may think, "*Well, we won it in '0?! Why not in '11? And, if we don't, well, we'll be back again next year! And next year!*", and so on. New kids on the block are more likely to be asking themselves, "*Is this destined to be my only shot at the Holy Grail? The HAC? The L. & H. League?*"

Yet, after grinding their way through the reigning L. & H. champions, 2-1 at Leurbost; thrashing their '08 conquerors, Castletown, 4-0 at Fortrose; and eventually trouncing much-fancied Kirkwall Rovers (the '97 winners), 5-1 in a Maryburgh QF, the Blues had nothing to fear from new favourites, Avoch, who had eliminated the holders, Pentland United, in their own highly-charged QF. Monday's victors at Cameron Terrace started, except for Chris Macleod's replacing the unavailable Kevin "Gochan" Macleod up front, whilst returnee Donnie Macphail joined David Beaton, Donald "D.I. Maclennan, Archie Macdonald, and Kevin "Barra" Macneil on the bench.

So, once more the class of 2011 had, "*to leave the books in dust, And oil the unused armour's rust*", as the Carloway "golden generation" aspired to the glory their efforts so richly deserved in this ground-breaking rollercoaster of a season.

And yet again, the spectators were provided with the customary breathless Carloway opening, this time stunning their fans by witnessing their goalkeeper concede a penalty in Avoch's first real break, get yellow-carded, pull off two exquisite saves, then leave the field injured, all within the opening nine minutes. Five minutes had elapsed when Gary Urquhart chased a through ball wide on the right into the box, just touching it past an attempted block by Craigie, which, unfortunately, sent the striker flying. No doubt about the award, but bad luck too, as Urquhart was unlikely to have controlled the ball spinning away to the bye-line. Not quickly, anyway. Paul Brindle stroked the ball confidently, low to Craigie's right.

A minute later, a disconcerted defence left an exposed Craigie to get down smartly to his right to deny Brindle from 16 metres; then the elusive Urquhart beat the offside trap, left of centre, to race in but overran the ball slightly and Craigie blocked brilliantly beside the penalty spot, before leaving the field immediately afterward, injured.

Na Gormaich's midfield were in danger of being outplayed in the centre of the park, as an all-black 4-man line-up, with chief playmaker, Charlie Christie (ex-ICT) in the centre, were using their weight and tidy control to play across the line, till the long ball - not aimless punts, but carefully placed narrow diagonals - could be placed over the Blues' big men in front of Urquhart and Brindle, breaking fast, wide of centre, on either side. Brindle, especially, proved to be an exceptionally tricky customer, neat in control and laying-off. A rightwing half-forward, Ian Wilson, trawled the right side, getting forward whenever possible, while Paul Gair came shooting through the centre to support the troublesome striking pair, as required.

Initially, Carloway's main concern was to stem the rush, and get forward, but there was hope: the Avoch back-line looked short, while the wings could be exploited: "Dokus's" pace troubled wide on the right, and gradually, Crossley, "Sqweg", and Macleod employed the high de Boer diagonal over the pressured Kenny White; also, on the left, "Tago" had the beating of Scott Houston, even from a standing start, although early Avoch pressure was pulling him back.

On 9 minutes, Carloway's first shot on goal saw a "Sqweg" piledriver from 23 metres, right of centre, pushed over confidently by Neil Mackay. On 12 minutes an opposing drive broke down in front of the Carloway box and Mackinnon drove through the centre and found Chris Macleod clear on the left; he cut in past his wrong-footed marker and tried to slot through to the free "Dokus", ghosting in on the right but Martin Macallister just intercepted. But then the 16th minute saw joy and happiness suddenly illuminate the Blues. The ball was played into the Avoch box, cleared untidily, then returned high, to be headed wide to the right by Chris Macleod, on the 18-metre line, for "Dokus" to come speeding through into the box and from 16 metres send a trademark screamer across Mackay into the far corner of the net.

The Black Isle side were not amused. Paul Brindle escaped wide on the right, cut in sharply but Beaton saved well at his right-hand post. Two minutes later Brindle broke free on the left, only to be thwarted by a magnificent Mackinnon covering tackle inside the box. Then, on 23 minutes, what would have been the goal of the season: with the Blues forced back, a long cleared ball allowed Neil Mackay to advance out of his area, untroubled on the right, to boot clear from 25 metres; but his clearance was low and came straight through the centre to Moody, who immediately went high for the Pelé lob. It sailed long, of the right strength and flight, but drifted a couple of metres past, as an awestruck Morefield assembly watched.

What a goal that would have been!

Both sides really had the bit between their teeth now: Mackay managed to block the twisting/ turning Urquhart on the right in 32 minutes, though the striker still managed to squeeze in his shot; a scramble ensued, and a final shot from 18 metres went over. Five minutes later Crossley surged through the centre, to find "Dokus", who flicked on to "Tago" breaking on the right, but his flick from 12 metres was gathered safely by Mackay. The engrossing first half ended with a couple of heart-stopping moments for the Blues, with first, Christie being played in through the centre; Beaton blocked expertly but the ball broke out, and a fast-arriving Gair thundered an absolute right-foot rocket just over the left crossbar from 18 metres. Right on the whistle, Beaton had to claw away for a corner a low shot from 20 metres out on the right.

It appeared that the second half would provide more of the same, but, in the opening minute came a missed opportunity which will haunt the waking moments of any Carlaway attendee: "Dokus" broke free on the right; the expected flag did not go up and he sped to the bye-line; inexplicably, Neil Mackay ran outside his 6-metre line to guard his goal, so "Dokus" wasted no time dispatching the ball to Chris Macleod 8 metres out in front of goal. But his flick was blocked by the "*Go-and-meet - don't wait to arrive*" Macallister, whose lightning reaction blocked the strike.

In a sense, the tide went out, after that. On 49 minutes a Brindle free-kick 25 metres out in the centre hit the wall, before the same player echoed "Dokus" to race behind the line, but Beaton saved fearlessly at his feet inside the box. Only a minute later the simplest of forward balls saw Brindle yet again defy the flag, anticipating through the centre behind the defence to head over the advancing goalkeeper from 20 metres. On 52 minutes a disputed free-kick on the edge of the box led to a Wilson drive being blocked for a corner, before na Gormaich had a final flurry of resistance. On 56 minutes a "Tago" free-kick from the centre-line was met by Moody, 16 metres out, to head leftwards across the line, but Mackay finally showed what he was made of, with a brilliant block from Crossley, 8 metres out, left of goal. Another "Tago" free-kick, two minutes later, 22 metres out, just cleared the bar, before the game, inexorably, started to spin rapidly away from the Blues, as a tactical change in approach emerged from the Black Isle men.

George Patience clearly had been watching: the long ball was disappearing; balls to feet were "in", usually to those of Brindle, Wilson, and Urquhart. Carlaway's big men were visibly tiring, so the twisting/ turning Henry-type figure, who also possessed electric bursts of speed, was increasingly effective in attack. The full-backs pushed, as "Dokus" and "Tago" fell back in support while the weight in the tackle and assured possession of the Christie-led midfield was draining their opposite numbers, who, throughout the whole game, struggled, despite some aggressive surges and insightful final passes, to find a consistent shape and impose a rhythm on their, and hence the team's, game. In a sense, the whole methodology of the contest had been dictated by Avoch. And it got worse: on 62 minutes the pace of Brindle took him through again but he fired well-wide to Beaton's left from 20 metres. Four minutes later a neat wall-pass sent Urquhart in right of centre but Beaton once more miraculously blocked to his left from 16 metres and the ball crept past his left-hand post.

The pace of the game had died now, except in the final third of the park in front of David Beaton, where Brindle and Urquhart were repeatedly outpacing the Carlaway back-line. On 70 minutes another tactical change saw the resumption of the ball

over the top approach and this enabled Brindle to creep in from the right and fire across Beaton but wide of his right-hand post. With fifteen minutes left, a David Taylor free-kick, 22 metres out on the left, smacked against the wall and flew away; but there was to be no Melchizedek moment for the Blues as a minute later another long ball to Domhnall Mackay's left found the irrepressible Brindle's pace carrying him through to the left bye-line for the cut-back from 12 metres, which slipped under the unlucky keeper, hit the covering Mackinnon in the goalmouth and went in.

Everyone now accepted that was it, and only the brilliance of David Beaton prevented Paul Brindle adding to Avoch's tally in the final minutes, several times, as Gary Urquhart and he repeatedly surged through a shell-shocked Carloway back-line. Yet, amazingly, na Gormaich could (or should?) have pulled one back on 86 minutes when an enormous Mackinnon free-kick from his own half found an alert Archie Macdonald free behind the defence, wide on the left; in a classic Van Persie show of skill, he brought the ball down beautifully, chest and foot, turned, and hooked the ball across goal, square on 12 metres, but, once again, the "*Go-and-meet - don't wait to arrive*" Avoch defending got there first to whip the ball away from the feet of "Dokus".

Maybe the Loch Broom minister knows something we ordinary mortals don't. If he had happened to be at the game, he would have experienced a life-enriching occasion. When political parties lose an election, they usually come out with platitudes like, "*We are taking stock*", or "*Lessons will be learnt*". In football, it's Arsène Wenger pieces of claptrap that rule, like, "*We are rebuilding*," or "*We are giving youth a chance*". So, in the SPL, every year, that must mean that while one team is winning, the other eleven are "*Rebuilding*"; ten of them must then be continually "*Rebuilding*".

Carloway don't really have this option, even if they wanted it, although, like every Island team, there are young players, like Dan Crossley, Archie Macdonald, Seumas and Calum Macleod, and Kevin "Barra" who must be continually blooded - in Island terms, maybe "*bloodied*" is a more appropriate spelling. Perhaps the players won't subscribe to this view for a month or two but they will have benefitted from this encounter; at times they had to reach for, and frequently achieved, a standard they are unused to, except when they have run into Lochs or Back, sometimes Aths and West Side, in their prime.

Carloway did sag alarmingly here after the hour, yet up till then they had performed admirably against all-round quality opposition, who performed very close to a "professional" standard, admittedly at a reduced level, throughout. Weight, power, and plenty of skill in the Avoch midfield fragmented committed but toiling Carloway middle men, and set up the bullets for two relatively uncontainable forwards to fire, as they spun and dribbled to exhaust the Carloway defence. However, what must be remembered is that even against an admittedly more gifted and experienced team, Carloway lived with these men in black for an hour, albeit at full stretch, repeatedly threatened down the wings, and if you are a sour-grapes person you could legitimately argue that Carloway certainly had luck in this game. It just happened to be bad luck: the penalty, and at the wrong time; the own goal: Moody's moment of inspiration; Chris Macleod's chance near half-time; "Dokus" near the end, and so on. All of that, of course, ignores the general tenour of a contest that was repeatedly influenced by the opposition.

The real question is: did Avoch just tire Carloway out? Or were they, simply, the better team? And if so, what was it, especially, that made them better? And what

the boys in blue have to do then, to progress as players and as a team, is to reach this level as often as possible - HAC SFs and Finals; League deciders; Cup Finals: have silverware in the trophy room - and playing teams of this quality will become the norm. On the evidence of the first hour at Morefield Park, none of the players would be found wanting!

Avoch man of the match: Paul Brindle.

Carloway Man of the Match: David Beaton.