

Lewis & Harris League:

Carloway 0 (0) Lochs 1 (1)

Jim O'Donnell 17

At Cnoc a' Choilich.

Friday, 13.4.12.

Ref.: Billy Macdonald.

David Beaton

Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Calum Tom Moody Gus Maciver Donald "D.I." MacIennan

Calum "Caley" Macleod Seumas Macleod Dan Crossley Murdo "Squeg" Macleod

Gordon "Tago" Macdonald

Kevin "Gochan" Macleod

Subs.: Donnie Macphail (Calum "Caley" Macleod) 65; Scott Macaulay (Murdo "Squeg" Macleod) 79; Andy "Barvas" Macleod (Dan Crossley) 90.

After the debacle of the Barra Tournament ("*What weekend are we actually talking about here?*"), then positive displays in pre-Season friendlies against Harris, West Side, and United, the cock finally crew over Cnoc a' Choilich and last year's League Runners-Up hit the turf in earnest to face the team whose name has been a byword for excellence in island football for most of the last decade.

The Carloway squad remained strong and only two new faces featured. Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald was unavailable, while Kenny "Beag" MacIennan is now Aberdeen-based; Darren Mackinnon in Her Majesty's Service. The arrival of Gus Maciver from Athletic meant Domhnall Mackay was able to move right to fill the gap left by the absent Andrew "Tago" Maciver, who is in Australia.

Lochs still looked formidable. The Leurbost men probably look back at last season less than gleefully; all teams who have dominated their respective spheres must mourn the passage of the glory years but despite that, they still tasted cup success, something the gods seemed to have denied forever to their opponents tonight, and even if Lochs didn't reach the heights of previous years, they were still a class above most of their opponents. What else could be expected from a team with Peter, Ally, Graeme, and Robert Mackenzie; David Macmillan; "Lava"; and "Nomie" featuring? Indeed, the side facing na Gormaich this evening had a dreadfully familiar look about them. Granted, gone was the class of Andy Murray and David Martin; there was no Ally Mackenzie and ... and ... ? But was that not the recently "*retired*" Don "Lava" Macleod lining up up front beside "Nomie"? The "*injured*" David Macmillan shaking "Sqweg's" hand? In addition, beside him in midfield stood elegant playmaker, Angie Campbell, late of Ness.

So, on a pitch lovingly prepared by George Spy - a work of art in itself worthy of the Turner Prize - plenty for the Carloway boys to reflect on, before Billy Macdonald opened the season at Cnoc a' Choilich (as he did against United last year). A howling nor-easterly drove Lochs straight out of the blocks through the Blues, leaving the Carloway midfield bypassed and floundering for most of the opening half-hour, as Macmillan and Robert Mackenzie drove

through the centre and Peter Mackenzie, in best Richard Gough-mode, created oceans of space on the right to supply the ever-elusive "Nomie", who in turn regularly set up the bullets for "Lava" to fire.

On 3 minutes a Seumas Macleod foul on Peter Mackenzie, 20 metres out, slightly right, produced a glorious David Beaton block, low to his right, to deny the sweetest of strikes by Macmillan. Minutes later, a short pass-back from Gus Maciver led to another brilliant block by the goalkeeper, followed by a defensive scramble to clear, before Lochs once more broke, this time down the right to the bye-line, but the cut-back was cleared for a corner. From this, the ball broke out to Peter Mackenzie but his snap-shot broke wide for yet another corner, which came to nothing. At this stage quick tackling and spreading, unified forward movement, *a la* the vintage Lochs every other team feared, were denying possession to the Carloway midfield, despite Dan Crossley's and Seumas Macleod's best efforts, hence nullifying any forward threat, and pressuring the defence into loss of shape, hasty tackling, and unnecessary fouls in dangerous positions.

On 13 minutes another Macmillan free-kick, 20 metres out on the right, was pushed away to his right by Beaton, then seemed to come back off the inside of his right-hand post to an unmarked "Lava" 8 metres out, but his reflex drive somehow went wide of goal. Four minutes later, and yet another free-kick, this time taken by "Nomie", out on the right wing, led to the opener. The ball broke down inwards off the challenging line-up and in the ensuing scramble, David Macmillan appeared to touch it on, before Jim O'Donnell helped it home. Untidy but they all count.

The Lochs onslaught abated slightly after this and Carloway, at last, managed to grind their way forward, and a war of attrition developed in the centre of the park. However, it was fully 25 minutes on the clock before na Gormaich's first, and only, first-half chance was to materialise: a corner on the right found "Sqweg" on the right corner of the Lochs' box and his delicate cross was headed just over by Moody charging in on the left. But the Blues were still struggling to impose themselves in midfield to create, and lack of a penalty box presence meant opportunities were non-existent. Indeed, Lochs could well have added to their total: on 37 minutes a breaking ball off the Carloway defence found Peter (Junior) Mackenzie storming forward to drive it just over from 22 metres. On 43 minutes a Peter Mackenzie free-kick, just inside the Carloway half on the right, was reverse-nodded back by "Lava" to "Nomie", but the usually sure-fire striker screwed his shot wide to the right from 16 metres.

The proverbial game of two halves, or maybe the wind was more of a participant than the spectators had realised. The two sides appeared to have switched jerseys at half-time, or someone had slipped bromide into the Maroons' half-time tea. Lochs largely disappeared as an attacking force in the second half and Carloway finally established a presence in their opponents' half. Domhnall Mackay replaced Peter Mackenzie as Richard Gough while "Tago" was to perform a convincing impersonation of Francisco Gento. Immediately the latter burst down the left, before cutting inwards to set up a

Seumas Macleod drive from 22 metres, which Cameron Houston tipped over. Three minutes later Crossley broke free on the right but his low cross from the bye-line saw Seumas Macleod's attempted conversion from 8 metres beaten away for a corner by Houston. Carloway had all the play now in an error-strewn half, as the wind played havoc with any ball above waist-height, though the Lochs back men were protecting Houston well. On 63 minutes an enormous Seumas Macleod free-kick from just inside the Lochs' half went skiting right through on the wet turf to thump into Houston's chest, but the keeper reacted first under pressure to drop on the ball.

It was the 81st minute before na Gormaich's next sight of goal: a deadly "Tago" free-kick 20 metres out on the right was nodded on by "Gochan", but touched past on the left. From the resultant corner the ball broke down at the near post, was cleared off the line to Mackay on the left, and his chip back in was flicked just past Houston's right-hand post. Then with 5 minutes to go, almost the sucker-punch, courtesy of "Nomie", as he broke at speed down the right to send a vicious low cross whizzing across the Blues's 6-metre line, marginally too far in front of the arriving strike force. On 88 minutes a "Tago" free-kick in the centre, 22 metres out, flew over, but despite an unprecedented 7 minutes of stoppage time, that was to be the final chance of the game.

The unrelenting wind killed off any chance that this might be a quality confrontation, but confrontation it still was. Last season witnessed Carloway's first home League victory over Lochs since 1994 and initiated a season that saw the latter's grip on island football slacken. The men in blue hoped to supersede the champions as the dominant local outfit but the Bacachs slipped in *"atween the twa"*. An additional fear was that the Blues might *"have scotched the snake, not kill'd it"*. That was partially true tonight: Graeme and Peter (Junior) Mackenzie rendered any Carloway attack ineffectual throughout, while Peter and Robert Mackenzie, Angie Campbell, and David Macmillan were outstanding in attack in the first half and formidable in augmenting the defence in the second; "Nomie" was his usual Wiltord pain in the neck to the Carloway defence, although he suffered from lack of support in the second.

The main worry Lochs have to think on after this is how completely they disappeared as a force in the game in the second half. For the Blues, the same problems were manifest, albeit in reverse. The back four - Domhnall Mackay, Calum Tom Moody, Gus Maciver, and "D.I." Maclennan - were immense throughout (when are they ever not?), while David Beaton was razor-sharp behind them. However, things simply did not happen in front of them; Dan Crossley, Seumas Macleod, "Tago" and "Gochan" ran themselves to a standstill but without effect in the first half, and in the second half, though wind-assisted, pluck and drive were the dominant features, without shape or game-plan. The isolated guile of "Tago" and late-arriving creativity of Donnie Macphail could not compensate for the lack of a tight organization in an admittedly combative midfield or for no threatening presence in the opposition box.

Lochs Man of the Match: Graeme Mackenzie.
Carloway Man of the Match: Domhnall Mackay.