

Lewis and Harris League:

Carloway 5 (4) Back 1 (1)

Seumas Macleod 3 David "Ox" Macleod 14
Kevin "Gochan" Macleod 15
Scott Macaulay 18
Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 45+1
Gordon "Tago" Macdonald 90+1

Referee: Calum "Chancey" Macleod.
At Cnoc a' Choilich.
Monday, 7.5.12

David Beaton

Seumas Macleod Domhnall Mackay (capt.)? Gus Maciver Donald "D.I." MacIennan
Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Andrew "Tago" Maciver Dan Crossley Gordon "Tago"
Macdonald

Kevin "Gochan" Macleod Scott Macaulay

Subs.: Donnie Macphail (Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald) 73; Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod (Andrew
"Tago" Maciver) 76 ; Calum "Caley" Macleod (Scott Macaulay) 84.
Yellow cards: Domhnall Mackay 12.

Competing in a single Division League is akin to appearing in "*Groundhog Day*": you have to face the same demons repeatedly. Year after year they return, though, like Bill Murray, you are blessed with the chance to learn from experience and fashion a different outcome. Carloway, most likely, gazed less than benevolently on the men from the East trooping out on to Cnoc a' Choilich, our lately crowned Champions, and well-deserved too. Most memorably, they had sealed that honour here that Monday night barely eight months ago, a title that the Blues were convinced for most of the season would sit proudly in their own trophy room for the first time.

Had na Gormaich matured in any way since that disappointment? Tonight would tell. An initial blow was the absence of their iconic central stopper, Calum Tom Moody, a victim of serious ligament damage in Saturday's historic victory for Stornoway against Ross Sutherland. Despite injury in Friday's bounce game versus a Welfare side, Gus Maciver did appear, though with a heavily-strapped knee, and two favourites who missed 2011's 2-2 draw, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (with a knee strain) and Dan Crossley (broken fingers) were included. Andrew "Tago" Maciver was back on the island, but, perhaps surprisingly, started in a Makalele/Essien role, while Seumas Macleod moved to right wing-back. An aggressive 4-4-2 formation was preferred, with the bulk and power of Scott Macaulay, thankfully available once more, up front to offset the pace and artistry of "Gochan". The £1,000,000 transfer of Gordon Craigie to Lochs meant Kevin "Barra" Macneill was on the bench as substitute goalkeeper.

For Back, there was no Chris Adams, of course, now with Athletic, while Ross Hall's back problems continue to rule him out. Michael Maciver was in "Tohan's" spot in goal, but the other suspects were present: Martin Maclean the central playmaker, with Fraser Macleod lying right in attack, Murray Macleod patrolling left, and Kevin "Bloxy" Murray holding the centre.

On a bitterly cold night, Carloway benefitted from a driving nor' easterly to come straight downfield from the kick-off and unsettle the opposition. An immediate break on the right saw "Dokus" whip a vicious low cross across the face of the Back goal, 6 metres out. Maciver appeared to drop on it comfortably, totally missed, but did enough to deceive the lurking Blues' forwards. The ball was returned and broke for a corner on the left. Another 2011 Carloway tradition was now enacted; the explosive opening. Dan Crossley's beautifully-taken right-foot corner curled in at perfect head-height for Seumas Macleod to outjump everyone at the near post and bullet home an unsaveable header.

Last season, the battleground had been in midfield, with Martin Maclean dominant early, supported by a strong D.J. Macdonald coming through right at every opportunity. In the first half the line had repeatedly edged into the Carloway half and kept "Pongo", Domhnall Mackay, Calum Tom, and Darren Mackinnon pressured as Frazmac pulled them wide, Murray Macleod ran long on the left, and "Bloxy" shielded and held, as he awaited back-up from Adams *et al*, with Martin Maclean charging through in support. "Sqweg", Chris Macleod, Seumas Macleod, and Dan Macphail had simply been unable to supply "Gochan" and "Caley" as they had to retreat frequently to hold.

This time round, however, it took 13 minutes for Back to have a sight of David Beaton as Carloway's no-nonsense clearing and early ball, mainly high, thus wind-assisted, made the front line deep in the Bacachs' half. Then suddenly a nicely-worked move created space for Martin Maclean 20 metres out on the left of the box, but he seemed in two minds and pulled his low cross-cum-shot diagonally across the Carloway goal.

Then, out of nothing, a sudden equalizer: a corner on the left led to a ping-pong moment in the Blues' box, where no one seemed quite sure where the ball was going next, but then it broke to "Ox" just inside the box, rightish. He swung his right leg at it, didn't get it quite cleanly, somewhere between foot and knee, and it floated high and slowly just inside Beaton's right-hand post. Not a Wayne Rooney gem, but they all count! Were Back about to get things together and the game as a contest finally beginning in earnest?

Unfortunately no. Within five minutes na Gormaich had started to put it out of their reach. Carloway broke straight from the restart down the left; the ball was played back to the arriving "D.I.", who turned the ball on to his right and sent the most glorious of Martin Peters curlers over the heads of the retreating Jason Macleod and "Ox" for "Gochan" to head-slam past the helpless Maciver from 6 metres. An absolute peach! Things now went from bad to worse for the men from Col Uarach. In Carloway's next attack, this time on the right, Dan Crossley once more escaped the clutches of Murdo Macleannan(?) and chose early and high. It cleared the goal-face to "Tago" 8 metres out on the left. He squared to the unmarked Macaulay, and the striker hook half-volleyed the ball home. Three minutes later another Crossley corner was headed off the line, before a Martin Maclean free-kick, 20 metres out on the left was headed over by Frazmac.

The final chance of the half seemed to be on 39 minutes when "Pongo" won the ball in the air on the half line, for Macaulay to head it on to "Dokus" moving in on the right of the box. A neat bit of juggling bewildered the defender and gave him the shot, but it hit the side-netting. Then a disputed free-kick on the edge of the Back box in injury-time. As "Chancey" lined up the defenders, "Dokus" flighted it in quickly, missed, then was ordered to re-take it. This time he sent it shoulder-high round the left of the line and neatly inside the low left-hand corner of the net.

The question now was: would Back use the wind as effectively in the second half as Carloway had in the first, and how well would na Gormaich cope with the expected onslaught? Sustained pressure, however, didn't really materialize, although it was a much more even half. The Bacachs did have a good opening fifteen minutes without being overpowering. Murray Macleod broke well on the left but "Bloxy", usually deadly in front of goal, was deceived by the pace of the low cross and the ball cannoned off his shins and past. On 53 minutes D.J.Macdonald stab-shot the ball over from 25 metres centrally, and three minutes later a carefully-taken Martin Maclean free-kick from the same position was pushed over by Beaton.

On 63 minutes a Murray Macleod corner from the right saw Fraser Macleod head past Beaton's right-hand post, before a brutal, physical stalemate gradually emerged. The Carloway back-line were adamantine but the midfield and front men were gradually tiring and more holding/ marking than creative, even though Back were living dangerously as they pushed for a way back into the game. Then, on 77 minutes, came the Bacachs' best chance of the game. Fraser Macleod finally escaped his shackles, in a storming, aggressive run down the right before whipping a pin-point low cross to the centre to "Bloxy", 12 metres out in front of goal. He, in turn, wasted no time in dispatching the ball past Beaton but his shot was marginally too high, hit the underside of the bar, came down and was scrambled away. He could only look at the heavens in despair.

The game was now effectively over. On 82 minutes a breaking ball came to "Sqweg" 22 metres out on the left of the goal but his trademark drive cleared the bar. In injury-time, Frazmac headed just over before Back's night of misery was made complete by a fifth goal. Martin Maclean, trying to do a Roger Byrne out of defence, 20 metres from his own goal on the Back right, lost the ball to "Sqweg" who moved in and slipped the ball to his right behind the line to the unmarked "Tago", 16 metres from goal, and he was only too glad to exercise the *coup de grace* by slipping the ball past the hapless Maciver.

This was as one-sided a game as there has been lately between the sides, especially in the first half. Back were only a shadow of the side that performed here last September. There are two ways of looking at the reasons why, if there are any. Back could simply have been off-form, or out-of-sorts. Perhaps Ross Hall (and Chris Adams) were more central to their success than was acknowledged. What team wouldn't miss a Ross Hall? The mainstays of the side still contributed hard: Martin Maclean's tackling, forward

surges and the early diagonals; Murray Macleod's control on the left; and "Bloxy's" presence and holding in the centre were as evident as ever and when they got it on together, the usual Back suddenly looked like materialising; but, overall, it simply did not happen tonight, or was not allowed to happen.

The other way of looking at the game is to accept that Carloway played better than they did last season, or have improved, and got the better of Back tonight simply because they were the better team tonight, perhaps even becoming a better team. Hopefully, it's the last. Certainly there was not a weakness in the Blues' line-up, with Domhnall Mackay and Gus Maciver outstanding, while "D.I." looks twice the player he was last season. Playing "Pongo" in the Michael Essien role was a master stroke, and his power and drive offset the creativity and thoughtful play of Dan Crossley. The weight and physicality of Scott Macaulay up front also, especially in the goalmouth, "*a man in the box*", allowed "Gochan" the freedom to move off the ball and play, while "Tago" and "Dokus" could remain wide, and all three of them constantly ran at the defence.

Carloway Man of the Match: Gus Maciver.

Back Man of the Match: Kevin "Bloxy" Murray.