

Lewis and Harris League:

Athletic 3 (1) Carloway 2 (1)

*Scott Maciver 28, 50, 82 Andrew "Tago" Maciver 43
Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 75*

Referee: D.J. Maclean (Bragar).

At Goathill Park, Stornoway.

Monday, 28.5.12

David Beaton

*Seumas Macleod Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Gus Maciver? Donald "D.I." MacIennan
Kenny "Dokus"Macdonald Dan Crossley Andrew "Tago" Maciver Ali "Tolsta"Maciver
Kevin "Gochan" Macleod Scott Macaulay.*

Subs.: Donnie Macphail (Ali "Tolsta" Maciver) 86.

Yellow Cards: Gus Maciver 78.

Footballing seasons in the Islands are relentless trials commitment and fortitude: crushing disappointment must be forgotten immediately as the next challenge appears. Carloway had little time to ponder an opportunity squandered in Benbecula that would have led to a reasonable HAC Round 3 tie versus Sleat and Strath, before the next gig in the roadshow was scheduled at their inverse "Field of Dreams", Goathill.

Their opponents, fellow front-runners, Athletic, were runaway victors over Barra on Saturday and the Blues had, of course, to endure a return trip from Berneray with them on the Leverburgh ferry. Despite winning the corresponding fixture last season 3-2, thanks to a Donnie Macphail first-half double and a stunning "Dokus" drive with 21 minutes to go, Carloway Hate Figure No. 1, Scott Maciver, still managed to induce a fit of looseness in the hind quarters with two late strikes, having abandoned his earlier provider role behind striker, Robert Jones, to lead the line for the final 20 minutes. Also, successive early visits in the past two seasons in the ABC Cup have led to comprehensive maulings, 0-3 in 2012, 1-4 in 2011.

So, not the fixture or venue of choice, perhaps. Tonight, Carloway's only absentee was Calum "Caley" Macleod (exams), though Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod, victim of a leg strain at Linciate, dropped to the bench. Thankfully, David Beaton and Gus Maciver were available. This allowed Ali "Tolsta" Maciver to move forward into left midfield and Seumas Macleod to move right to wing/back. Andrew "Tago" Maciver now supported Dan Crossley in the engine room, to supply the free-running "Dokus" and "Gochan", and surging Scott Macaulay.

There was no Ross Macrae facing them and Murdo "Marags" Maciver replaced his namesake Mark between the sticks, but the formidable attack duo, Scott Maciver and Chris Adams, led, backed by a strong midfield, in Nic Davis, Elliot Rudall, Ali "Koch" Morrison, and Scott "Flapjack" Macaulay. Additional grit was provided on the left by "Doug" Maciver and pace at the back by Donnie Macleod (ex-United).

A beautiful sunny evening, marred slightly by a persistent, freezing breeze off

Broadbaird, saw the Blues, no doubt mindful of recent disasters here, start positively. Mackay and Maciver attached themselves like limpets to Maciver and Adams in a high back-line, which pushed to assist the pugnacious "Pongo" and Crossley blunt the opposition and create forward momentum. "Gochan" and Macaulay repeatedly spread; "Dokus" dropped back, drawing "Doug" as marker, allowing space left of Clinton and Macleod for the runners to move wide behind. On 6 minutes one such break on the right led to two "Tolsta" corners, the second met by a Seumas Macleod head-lob, easily held by "Marags" under pressure.

Two minutes later, an attempted Aths clearance cannoned off another defender straight to "Dokus", who immediately released an unmarked Macaulay in the centre, 22 metres from goal, to run in on goal. "Marags" was out like a flash, and as Macaulay tried to slip a right-foot shot, slightly mishit, past his right-hand side, 16 metres from goal, he stuck out a foot to block brilliantly.

On 17 minutes, Scott Maciver finally managed to get a metre between himself and his marker, turn and drive from 20 metres, but his effort flew wide. Five minutes later a typical "Pongo" grinding stop and drive forward allowed him to free "Dokus" diagonally down the right. The wing-man won the bye-line, and his screaming cross was met by Macaulay, 10 metres out in front of goal, but his header zoomed upwards.

Fast forward two minutes to the first masterclass of the evening: "How to execute a headed strike from a corner". A Gary Macleod corner from the right was leaned into by a stooping Maciver to glance shoulder-high to Beaton's left from 12 metres centrally. It all looked so simple; well, if you have the skills it is. Na Gormaich had an instant opportunity to claw their way back, when "Marags" failed to gather a spinning ball, which broke out to "Pongo", 14 metres out in the centre, but the ball was last seen passing Chicken Head lighthouse.

Frustration seemed to be causing the Blues to lose focus, the shape to break slightly, under combative Hoops pressure, and the marking became less tight. On 35 minutes Adams broke to deliver the golden ball in to the racing Maciver, ghosting in front of Mackay in the centre, but Beaton moved smartly to boot clear from 20 metres. It almost got worse for the Blues. On 39 minutes a ball from the left, 20 metres from Carloway's right bye-line, came back to "Koch" in the centre and his snapshot drive from 30 metres dipped and whacked against the base of Beaton's right-hand post.

Then Lady Fortune turned back to Carloway. On 43 minutes a Crossley corner on the right came back to him off Stephen Clinton, and was returned gratefully, low this time, where it somehow managed to bounce through to "Pongo", lurking to the left of goal, 8 metres out. He flicked the ball upwards and back over a lunge, then thumped a left-foot bullet past a helpless keeper. Moments later, Carloway had an unexpected chance to go in at half-time in the lead, when a short corner was played to Crossley on the right and his shoulder-high cross was met by a glancing header by "Gochan", but it sped

just past the far post.

The half-time oranges fired up Carloway who opened the second half aggressively, as if to demonstrate that force of will could overcome a malevolent fate. A Mackay charge from the back drove him into the centre circle where his perfect defence-splitter left "Dokus" running free into the box diagonally from the right but "Marags" somehow made himself big enough to block what seemed a certainty from 14 metres. Then it was groan time all round once more for the Blues and their fans as, on 50 minutes, an attempted clearance to his right by Gus Maciver rebounded back, square across the 18-metre-line, was laid off by Davis to Maciver leftish and he reacted fast, to advance two steps, then slot it past Beaton into the keeper's far left corner.

Stunned disbelief perhaps best describes na Gormaich's reaction to the new deficit, but they were not deterred for long as once more Crossley and "Pongo" pushed forward, backed, inevitably, by increasing assistance from Mackay, Maciver, and Macleod. "D.I" became a left-winger, rather than a full-back. On 58 minutes another crashing drive through the centre by "Pongo" saw him pick out "Dokus" on the right with the golden defence-splitting diagonal. "Dokus" made 10 metres from the bye-line, but his flashing knee-high cross was just that bit too fast for the arriving "Gochan" to control, 6 metres out by the left-hand post, and his swinging left foot sent the ball soaring out on to Goathill Road.

Desperation to equalize, however, left gaps at the back, and, on 64 minutes an exquisite saving tackle by "Pongo" was necessary to whip the ball away from the breaking Maciver, directly in front of goal, 16 metres out.

On 68 minutes a mazy Crossley run on the left took him through several bone-crunchers out of his own half and into the centre of the Aths' half to release the breaking Macaulay but "Marags" anticipated to block the ball away from the striker 10 metres from goal. Crossley, following up, smacked the ball back in. The keeper seemed to have it, but it spun over his right shoulder square to the lurking Macaulay but he could only force it into the side netting.

Then almost the clincher at the other end as a breaking ball came to Maciver just outside the box, behind his marker on the left. They wrestled their way towards the advancing Beaton, who matched "Marag's" earlier Lev Yashin moment on 8 minutes, by producing a breathtaking stop with his left foot, as the Aths' hitman tried to outwit him low from 16 metres.

Two minutes later, it was all square. Scott Macaulay breaking right on the edge of the box was adjudged impeded, and "Dokus" sent the sweetest of right-foot dead balls high to Maciver's left. An absolute cracker! But soon its equal arrived. Carloway poured forward, believing the momentum was theirs, but when the Hoops broke right, the ball was switched in to Maciver 20 metres out, to the right of the box. This time he turned inwards and sent an unsaveable Andy Penman-like left-foot drive over Beaton into the top of the net. Wow! Within 7 minutes two Goals of the Season, one at either end.

The entertainment continued, as na Gormaich frantically pressed to save a point, but the Clinton-led Aths' defence, en masse, denied them comfortably until the final seconds of the third minute of injury-time, when a fantastic ping-pong routine in their box, which almost looked as it had been rehearsed, witnessed two goal-bound attempts blocked, and a third headed off the line, as Domhnall Iain raised his whistle.

Oh for a Carecas! A Riva! A Van Basten! A bit of luck, even! The Rev. Iain D. Campbell, the new Free Church moderator, said recently that God had turned his face from Scotland; He certainly seems to have turned it from Carloway. This evening they certainly knew how to "plough the fields and scatter the good seed ... ", but where exactly?

The Blues seemed in charge of their own fate: they built well, found the open spaces, and repeatedly delivered the ball smartly into the optimum scoring areas. However, after that, the ball seemed destined to end up in the Minch, Arnish Point, or Laxdale - or "Marag's" arms or side-net. The Blues appeared to be performing in their own version of "Zen and the Art of Missing Chances", especially Act 1: "The aim of the game is not to score, but see how many chances you can create in 90 minutes, then miss them".

Mourinho would have choked on his Rioja watching this, as his cardinal rule was repeatedly proved: possession and territory for most of a game are worth zilch if you do not take the chances such play delivers or should be delivering; if you are less dangerous than the opposition, who manage to score three goals with far, fewer chances, while, after all your neat build-ups, smart moves, pressing of the opposition, you only scrape two, what verdict is appropriate?

Na Gormaich had the proverbial barrowload of chances - not cast-iron "Oh, no! He should have scored!" chances - but good enough to expect a reasonable conversion total, but passed them up continually. The finest striker on the island had only four good chances, yet converted three, only missing out on the fourth because of a brilliant David Beaton block. If he had had half the chances the entire Carloway team had, on a single evening in Stornoway, he would have overtaken "Lava's" 399 - or is it 400 - in these 90 minutes.

How often have you heard it? "They played well, but they didn't take their chances". Carloway did play well; at times they played really well, especially the inexhaustible Crossley and one-man force-field "Tago", but when the whistle blows, it's the team that scores the goals, or more goals, that deserves the points.

Athletic Man of the Match: Scott Maciver.
Carloway Man of the Match: Dan Crossley.