

Eilean an Fhraoich Cup Semi-Final Leg 1

Carloway 1 (0) Ness 2 (1)

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 52

Murdo "Mojo" Maclean 42

Stephen Boyd 87

At Cnoc a' Choilich.

Monday, 23.7.12.

Ref.: Murdo Macaulay (Lochs).

Gordon Craigie

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Stuart Macdonald Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Donald "D.I." MacIennan

Kevin "Barra" Macneil Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod Donnie Macphail Calum "Dola" Morrison

Gordon MacIennan

Subs.: Ben Smith (Calum "Dola" Morrison) 45; David "Cirbhig" Macleod (Murdo "Sgweg" Macleod) 86

A return to the seasonal curiosity of the EaF, a domestic competition in which the Blues had actually won a round, saw Carloway recall most of the team which "*starred*" in the bore-fest last Monday against Harris, with youth stars, Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur, Calum "Dola" Morrison, and Gordon MacIennan again featuring. There was, however, a welcome return for Stuart Macdonald in central defence alongside Captain Courageous, Domhnall Mackay, to replace the unavailable Seumas Macleod, with Donald "D.I." MacIennan also re-appearing on the left after injury. Andrew "Tago" Maciver and Dan Crossley were unfortunately unfit, and, of course, Gus Maciver, Kevin "Gochan" Macleod, David Beaton, and Calum Tom Moody ineligible.

So a Carloway/United Select started against a Ness side which, excepting the perennial "Sweeney" between the sticks, looked frighteningly young: Finn Rush Taylor back left; Innes Macsween and Stephen Boyd as stoppers; "Titch" Morrison and Jack Dunlop on the flanks; Sam Macsween on the bench; and major pain-in-the-neck ... sorry, star playmaker ...Andrew "Bubble" Macleod, tucked in behind the main striker, the astonishingly risen-from-the-dead, Murdo "Mojo" Maclean. Team sheet surprises didn't end there though: among Carloway's subs was a certain Norrie "Tago"Maciver, but there was no sign of Christine Primrose or the rest of Manran on it. Maybe they didn't qualify.

Ness had the first-half advantages of bright early evening sunshine and a howling sou' westerly behind them as an initially scrappy contest began, though the first opportunity fell to the Blues after 4 minutes when "Dokus", breaking through the centre, released "Barra", ghosting behind Taylor on the right. He moved to the edge of the box but didn't connect properly with his attempted piledriver and it curved low across goal, was booted out by a retreating defender, hit another, then ricocheted along the 18-metre line; a melée followed, and the ball was eventually booted out for a corner.

On 10 minutes the next real chance came from a Carloway corner on the left,

the ball breaking out to Macdonald on the left edge of the box, who immediately slipped it rightwards to Mackay, 16 metres out, but his sidefoot shot went a metre outside "Sweeney's" right-hand post. Gradually, however, the pace of the Niseachs, their incisive tackling and desire for the ball, saw them assert themselves in midfield, as na Gormaich increasingly yielded to the same malaise that afflicted them in the second half on Friday at Col Uarach, indeed last Monday also, versus Harris. The lack of a commanding leader in midfield, the midfield's inability to operate as a cohesive unit, to win the ball and move it forward fast and decisively, caused them to be repeatedly beaten to the ball, caught in possession, sidelined, as the young Ness boys surged continually to pressure the defence and resulted in MacLennan becoming as isolated as Napoleon on Elba.

The breakthrough should have come on 24 minutes as a searching through ball between Mackay and Macdonald sent "Bubble" free but his decisive early strike from 20 metres flew lightning-fast and low outside Craigie's right-hand post. On the half-hour another break on the right saw "Mojo's" attempted bicycle-kick off the low square cross, 10 metres out, go past the same post. A minute later a Taylor free-kick from the halfway line gave Boyd the chance to drive the breaking ball from 20 metres but Craigie flicked the ball over brilliantly.

By this stage, the Blues were reeling, no longer featuring as an attacking entity, indeed, as any kind of entity, as Ness swirled round them and down either wing or between the stoppers. For all he was needed, "Sweeney" could have caught a bus into Stornoway to get on with his next project for BBC Alba. On 37 minutes Morrison shot over from 19 metres on the right, then "Bubble" reprised his earlier one-on-one, steaming behind his marker on a through ball into the box but Craigie was out like a flash for another exquisite block from 16 metres.

On 42 minutes the inevitable arrived, as Macleod, once more racing beyond the line, on the right, carried the ball into the box; Craigie once again pulled off a miraculous block from 12 metres but "Mojo" was the first to react and thumped the rebound over his flat-mate and into the roof of the net from 10 metres.

At the interval the Blues' management bit the bullet - or one of them anyway: "Dola" was sacrificed; there was a straight swap of Ben Smith for him on the left. "Barra" dropped back to right-back; "Tiger" joined his captain in the centre; Stuart Macdonald moved forward, and "Dokus" went right. No doubt there was also a *"heated exchange of views"* about the *"state of play"*! Carlaway did re-emerge fired-up. Immediately a sweeping "Sqweg"/"Dokus" move freed a rapidly-advancing "Barra" to shoot past "Sweeney's" right-hand post from 18 metres. Two minutes later the same player drove the ball past the other post from 20 metres, when the ball broke to him from a corner on the left.

On 52 minutes the Blues were level: a Niseach attack broke down through the centre; Mackay moved the ball on smartly to "Sqweg", who got it right,

inside Taylor, to the speeding "Dokus" to carry it on into the box, then place it expertly round a helpless keeper and just inside the far post from 16 metres.

The Casuals in the stand sat back with their Bovril and waited for business as usual. It didn't materialize. Instead, the old failings inexorably began to re-surface: the interminable fiddle-faddle in midfield and at the back, allowing the enemy time to re-group; the predictable backwards passing and movement; the retreat of forwards in search of that infrequently-seen spherical object; the inevitable bad pass and loss of control; the blistering opposition surge at pace.

Ness re-awakened. On 55 minutes a Ness break on the right saw Morrison whip a vicious low cross across the face of the Carloway goal, but too fast for the charging "Mojo". Two minutes later a carbon-copy break had the same result. On 65 minutes Stuart Macdonald did get his head to a "Dokus" corner from the right but it went just over. A minute later a looping header by the same player off a Macphail corner went even closer, just outside "Sweeney's" left-hand bar/post junction. However, three minutes later the pace of the uncontainable "Bubble" on the Niseach left left "Barra" a metre behind to reach yet another through ball between stopper and back but, again, Craigie reacted like quicksilver to block from 14 metres. A minute later an enormous "Sgweg" free-kick from just inside the Ness half on the right had to be punched away by "Sweeney" under pressure beneath his bar to his right.

With ten minutes left, the next chance fell to the men from the north, with a free-kick, dangerously-placed in the centre, 20 metres out, but Innes Macsween lifted it harmlessly well over the bar. Both sides were now living perilously close to the edge. On 82 minutes "Dokus's" trickery moving right allowed him space to fire the ball across goal but MacIennan just failed to connect. Moments later Macphail broke free on the right also but his low, square cross flew across goal, 8 metres out, without finding any takers. Next, it was "Titch" Morrison's turn to set off on a mazy run down Carloway's left flank, check, then turn inside to sweep a tempting cross/ shot across the Blues' box and past the far post.

With three minutes to go, the decisive moment arrived: a Ness corner on the left dipped low at the near post and Boyd reacted first to guide it low into the net from 6 metres. Na Gormaich did have a ball in the net in injury-time but it was ruled off-side(?), and a "Dokus" free-kick on the right side of the box flew high across goal, but the Niseachs survived to earn a deserved victory.

It's easy to dismiss such a dismal display as, "*Well, it's only the EaF. It'll be the REAL team on Friday against Point,*" but the same problems surfaced again last Friday against Back in the second half: a malfunctioning engine room, which lacked leadership and cohesive direction, dislocating the shape of the team, thus putting extra pressure on the defence and isolating the strikers. Not an easy problem to solve; yet the present squad, when fully fit and available, look capable of overcoming this and continuing success.

So, is it the injury list that is causing the problem, the absence of the game-

changing quality of Crossley and "Tago"; the aggression and drive of "Pongo" and Macaulay; the unavailability of Seumas Macleod, Gus Maciver, Beaton, "Gochan", and Moody tonight? Certainly when they are **ALL** missing, as a group, the prospects for any team must be damaged. Some will return on Friday; until then, the jury is out, though if the Rubhachs are as pacy, hungry, and direct as Ness were tonight, the problems will continue. Pace in midfield, and, at times, at the back, seems to be a persistent problem for the Blues; it simply will not go away. Confronted by a skilful striker, like tonight, the unsquashable "Bubble", or last Friday a direct, speedy goal machine like Fraser Macleod, Carloway always struggle; similarly with the likes of Scott Maciver; D.J.Clinton; Paul Brindle. But, perhaps, any team would struggle against such class, and the problem is insoluble.

Ness Man of the Match: Andrew "Bubble" Macleod
Carloway Man of the match: Gordon Craigie.