

End of season summary

Stuart Rankin, 20 October 2011 08:36

After Brazil were knocked out in the second round group stages of the 1978 World Cup Finals by arch-rivals, Argentina, despite a creditable no-score draw against the hosts, their mightily unhappy coach, Cláudio Coutinho, barked, "This World Cup has been a great moral victory for Brazil!" A week later, as César Menotti, La Albiceleste's coach, raised the Jules Rimet Cup in triumph, after their controversial victory over Peru and having (somewhat luckily) beaten the Netherlands 3-1 in the Final, he said simply, "Well, I congratulate Brazil on their great moral victory!"

In other words, a warm glow within is one thing; the point is, and will always be, to win! How many fans really remember Runners-Up? Who did Djokovic beat at Wimbledon this summer? Who lost the play-off to Keegan Bradley in the US PGA? How often have Czechoslovakia, or the Netherlands, reached the World Cup Final, never to win? How many people even know that the Czechs have ever been in a Final? They all become footnotes at the back of a history textbook, nothing more. Controversial Tory politician, Sir Enoch Powell, once said, "All political lives --- end in failure." The same might be said of sport.

A person or team never achieves what they believe to be their just deserts, while many feel they never receive the appropriate recognition for what they do. Even Man. Utd., GB's most successful side ever, and the world's most popular, are still seeking a string of European Champion successes to cap the Ferguson era, a World Club Championship even. Who then in the West of Lewis (apart from Barvas) could fail to empathise with the blighted aspirations of all involved with the Carloway "galacticos" as another season slips into the history books, with no proud array of trophies glittering in the Cnoc a' Choilich boardroom, to confirm four years of excellent commitment, endeavour, and toil from the finest squad of players ever to wear the blue of Carloway?

This season there have been many disappointments for Carloway, mainly in Cup-ties: 1-4 away to Aths in the ABC; 2-3 away to Point in the Lewis Cup; on penalties to West Side in the EaF; 1-2 to the same team, away, in the Jock Stein; and at Lionacleit, 1-2 in the Coop Cup to lochdar Saints; but no real embarrassments. Their two most decisive encounters saw an hour played in Ullapool before the HAC SF against Avoch started to drift. Tiredness (and the alertness and skill of Paul Brindle), decided the issue there, while the League game at Coll in June still hung in the balance at 2-4 with twenty minutes left, with na Gormaich fighting desperately - and ingenuously - to salvage the points, the final score a direct result of a team savagely chasing parity before the final whistle. However, an electric League campaign saw Carloway record an unprecedented ten League victories on either side of the reverse at Coll, netting 34 times to 11 against by 27th July, in the course of which they defeated the reigning Champions, Lochs, 4-1 at home and 2-0 away, and posted victories at Barvas (4-3), Goathill (twice: 3-2 and 2-0 versus Athletic and United), and Garrabost (5-2).

Meanwhile a team who only recorded two consecutive HAC victories and a first win in the tournament outside the Long Island in the summer of 2006, then a ground-breaking mainland victory in 2008 to reach the Quarter-Finals, ignored domestic Cup disappointment to storm their way to a first-ever HAC SF. En route, they overcame Lochs for a third time, 2-1 at Leurbost (thanks to the Goal of the Season from "Pongo"); swept aside their 2008 conquerors, Castletown, 4-0 in Fortrose, and much-fancied Kirkwall Rovers, 5-1 at Maryburgh; before finally succumbing to the eventual winners, Avoch, 1-3 in Ullapool.

Unfortunately, Autumn did not prove to be a "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" for the Blues, as first, Athletic (2-4, in a game Carloway led with 12 minutes left), and then the Rubhachs (3-4), arrived to shatter the League dream. This set up a final Clash of the Titans on 5th September between the island's two form

teams of 2011, both squads knowing what they must not let happen. Once more a League title was going close to the wire (as all should), as it had at Col Uarach in 2009, Rally Park in 2006, and Leurbost in 1995. A pulsating encounter saw Back take an early 2-0 lead in the second half, with 2011's most influential player, Kevin "Bloxy" Murray, brilliantly heading home a Chris Adams reverse header, Fraser Macleod finish off a glorious Adams-Murray Maclean-Martin Maclean move, before two crashing "Pongo" headers set up a pulsating final, but ultimately goal-less, five minutes to the League race.

So, once again, it was, "*Bitter constraint and sad occasion dear -----*", for Carloway, despite the new managerial team, Kevin Anderson and Graeme Miller, carrying the banner forward, using the basis of the sound team first developed by Peter "Dokus" Macdonald and which has served the Blues so well for the last four seasons. The conundrum regarding how to arrange the three foundations of the side at the back, resulted in twin rocks, Domhnall Mackay and the talismanic Calum Tom Moody, holding the centre with Andrew "Tago" Maciver moving right, thus allowing him scope as wing-back to deliver the breathtaking strikes which secured victory at Leurbost in the HAC and equality versus Back, with the result that he became joint second top goalscorer with emerging striker, Calum "Caley" Macleod, behind the irrepressible front man, Kevin "Gochan" Macleod, who notched 15.

The departure of the influential Darren Mackinnon at left wing-back is softened by the knowledge that Donald "D.I." MacIennan can fill the vacancy seamlessly, and the awareness that Andrew "V.P." Macleod and Ian Murdo Macleod always await the call. As ever the best goalkeeper on the island, Gordon Craigie, remained unshakeable between the sticks, and had to, as a rival pretender to that title, David Beaton, now competes for the manager's eye. Lack of availability and injury deprived the Blues of full use of the talents of Kenny "Beag" MacIennan and Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (though the latter still contributed a breathtaking screamer against Avoch), but the Gormaich's own David Hay/Roberto Baggio combination - Murdo "Sgweg" Macleod and Donnie Macphail - still drove the midfield forward, in support of the exciting, unique talents of Dan Crossley and Seumas Macleod, with the best of these last two still to come.

The perennial problem for the Blues was weight and firepower up front, evident since the departure of Scott Macaulay and Kevin "Savo" Smith. Who supports "Gochan", as Gordon "Tago" Macdonald retreats to support the left midfield, then bursts forward on his trademark runs to supply front-runners? With Archie Macdonald returning south, who is best to run left of centre? Many options were tried: the forceful presences of each Anderson, Billy and Kevin; the young, raw talent of "Caley" and Kevin "Barra" Macneil; the ebullient Dan Crossley and Seumas Macleod, each successful in their own way, though not permanently, and, of course, using either of the latter two subtracting that extra oomph factor from central midfield. No doubt, a solution will be found by the backroom staff.

So a record-breaking season for Carloway, though not quite as spectacular as players and supporters might have hoped. Certainly no failure - a first League Runners-Up spot; a record number of League victories and Goals scored; and a first-ever HAC SF spot. Certainly every fan received what he/she had signed up for: the commitment, entertainment, febrile excitement, and anguish that results from following a first-class football team. The colours were certainly carried forward for all of us, but the race was simply a furlong too long, though it is foolish to begin to believe that this extra distance cannot be covered next season. Self-doubt is the natural enemy of achievement. If the optimism and self-belief that powered the opening two-thirds of the season past can be rediscovered and energises a current squad that is the equal of any on the island, why not?

Go, Carloway!