

Acres Boys Club Cup Final:

Back 0 (0) Carloway 6 (2)

Kevin "Gochan" Macleod 2
Domhnall Mackay 22
Scott Macaulay 62
Dan Crossley 73
Fraser Macleod 82, 90+1

At Goathill Park.

Friday, 10.5.13.

Ref.: Stuart Macleod (Shawbost).

David Beaton

Calum Tom Moody Gus Maciver ☒ Donald "D.I." MacIennan

Kevin "Gochan" Macleod Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod ☒ Dan Crossley
Scott Macaulay Fraser Macleod Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Subs.: Seumas Macleod (Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald) 28; Kevin "Barra" Macneil (Scott Macaulay) 79; Craig Hacker (Dan Crossley) 85.

Subs. not used: Billy Anderson; Colin Maclean.

Yellow cards: Gus Maciver 50; Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod 83.

Last season's twin-cup success meant that the Blues no longer turn up for occasions like tonight's with 55-year-old albatrosses round their necks. Until Coop Cup success against tonight's opponents in 2012, Cup Final misery had been a *dominant leitmotif in the Blues' history*: the EaF last year; the Coop in 2010, the Lewis in 2007 and 2009; the Jock Stein in 2007 and 2009, and so on down the tunnel of the years. Cup campaigns had frequently been exhilarating theatre; their performances in Finals less so; in fact, terrifyingly predictable. "*Same old story*" became a regular refrain from the mouths of disgruntled, departing fans.

So over-reaction (and relief!) to last year's unexpected late-season success was understandable, fuelled by the heart-stopping intensity of the deciding penalty shoot-out in near darkness at Garrabost. The penalties decider a week later versus West Side, in the Moldova Lewis Cup Final, seemed practically anti-climactic by comparison. So, for once, confidence ran high down at Cnoc a' Choilich as they appeared tonight in the unaccustomed role of favourites, as a result of an astonishing opening run to the season of 6 straight victories, while the form of the Cup holders, and seven times winners, had been indifferent: victories in this Cup over West Side and United, but two League defeats out of three games played, and elimination from the HAC by Lochs.

There have been many changes at Col Uarach: Martin Maclean and Iain "Tohan" Macleod now play in the Highland League, while ace goalscorer, Fraser Macleod, who almost secured the Cup for them that night in Point, now faced them in Carloway blue. Murdo "Gress" MacIennan was now at Ness; Hammer of the Blues, Kevin "Bloxy" Murray, was unavailable and Chris Adams on crutches; and inspirational captain and midfield enforcer, Ross Hall, was suspended. Ali "Tolsta" Maciver and Andrew "V.P. Macleod, of course, were cup-tied.

Na Gormaich's only fitness doubt was over central playmaker, Billy Anderson, experiencing hamstring problems from Monday night's League game at Sgoil nan Loch, which forced him to drop to the bench beside Seumas Macleod, Kevin "Barra" Macneil, Craig Hacker, and Colin Maclean. So, nine of the starting eleven in the Coop Final started tonight, the other two present as substitutes. What looked like a 3-4-1-2 formation was adopted, with Scott Macaulay as *trequantista*; Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald wide left; Fraser Macleod roaming at will; and the tireless Kevin "Gochan" Macleod covering the entire right. Colin Maclean was heavily marked for the first half-hour, although how exactly to deal with Back's main playmaker, Murray Macleod, was to remain an unanswered question throughout.

Unfortunately, the weather had changed dramatically; what had been a beautiful sunny late Spring day across most of Lewis deteriorated markedly in late afternoon, and Goathill was already looking dubious by kick-off, as the cloud thickened and the heavens opened. The crowd was halved; their enthusiasm - and that of the players, no doubt - dampened. Within minutes the pitch was cutting up and both sides slipping and slithering. Nevertheless, those present were treated to what was once a typical Carloway opening: in their first attack "Dokus" advanced on the right and from midway into the Back half sent a shoulder-high diagonal towards "Gochan" in the centre. A defender failed to chop it away and it came on to "Gochan" to chest down and advance into the box. As a covering defender raced to block, the striker unleashed a low right-foot daisycutter from 14 metres wide of the arriving James Macleod and just inside his right-hand post (**1-0**). A clinically-taken peach!

Not the best start, therefore, for the Bacachs but they responded with a Murray Macleod free-kick from the halfway line causing confusion in the Carloway penalty area, bobbing around loosely before Beaton came to grab it. On 8 minutes another Carloway break saw the ball cleared forward to Fraz Mac, 24 metres out, rightish. He trapped it expertly, turned, and laid it off diagonally left to "Dokus", advancing into the box, but his snapshot flew well over. Two minutes later Macaulay won the ball on the left bye-line, then travelled inwards, but Macleod got down well to cut out his low squared cross.

Immediately it was Beaton's turn to remain vigilant when a 22-metre lobshot from Dave Maclean had to be touched over by the keeper at his right crossbar. "D.I." nodded the corner on to the left, where it was gathered on the edge of the box by Murray Macleod, who reversed, then sent a vicious low cross whizzing across the Blues' 6-metre line. A minute later "Dokus" was free on the left to send a high searching cross to the far post, but it was too high for Fraser Macleod and too difficult to control for "Gochan" beyond him.

On 16 minutes a Macaulay diagonal forward from inside the halfway line on the right found Fraz Mac on the left edge of the box; he turned to crack in a low drive but Macleod dropped safely on the ball. "Sqweg" sliced high and wide from 24 metres before Murray Macleod conceived a possible way back for Back, wriggling his way forward on a pass from the left and setting up Chris Macleod to move in from the right, but 14 metres from goal he lost control and was muscled off the ball by Mackay.

Then the scales turned inexorably Carloway's way. After 22 minutes, a "Gochan" run on the right was cleared away for a Macaulay corner, which came in high to Moody, 16 metres out on the left of the box. His reverse looping header inwards reached an unmarked Mackay in the centre, 10 metres out, to head coolly into Macleod's top right corner (**2-0**).

Back were now wobbling dangerously as Carloway surged. On 25 minutes Macaulay broke on the right and a lofted pass was dispatched early to "Gochan" moving clear to the right edge of the box, but his clever chip was read brilliantly by Macleod, to retreat smartly and touch on to the top of the bar and over. Ten minutes later it was "D.I." who lobshot from 24 metres on the left and again Macleod had to remain alert to flick the greasy ball over. On 36 minutes the keeper had to get down at his right-hand post to hold carefully a "Gochan" drive from 16 metres and then after 43 minutes the keeper had to fist away a Seumas Macleod pile-driver from 18 metres on the left.

On the stroke of half-time na Gormaich had the chance to kill the tie stone-dead when Moody sent the ball high forward to Fraser Macleod racing clear into the left side of the box. Macleod slid in to block the striker, who was trying to carry the ball round him to his right, and impeded him as he chased the loose ball, making him stumble and fall. A rather weak award, but the referee had no doubt. Domhnall Mackay placed the penalty low to the keeper's right, but

Macleod guessed right, dived smartly, and the ball spun high away left off his legs.

Half-Time: Back 0 Carloway 2.

What the best approach might be for Back in the second half was difficult to figure. Carloway were in their comfort zone, having adopted their favoured *modus operandi*: when Back approached, Maciver became Franco Baresi, clearing up any danger that might penetrate the Iron Curtain, as "Gochan" and Crossley sank back when required on the flanks to augment Moody and "D.I.". Mackay in turn doubled as Makalele, Seumas Macleod as Cristian Chivu; and when the ball came forward Scott Macaulay revelled in finest, knock-your-door-down Kichenbrand mode, animateur to Fraz Mac's and Gochan's bursts.

Despite Murray Macleod's persistent ingenuity (how **DO** you get the ball off this guy?) and imaginative release, little was happening up front - Colin Maclean was repeatedly isolated; Chris Macleod could not energize a midfield, which was repeatedly swamped by the power and ubiquity of the Blues, and the pace and spread of the forward rush stretched D.J. and the defence long and wide, so that James Macleod was continually in clear focus. Traffic was mainly one-way. On 48 minutes Maciver sent Macaulay down the right but his chip from 20 metres travelled beyond the far post. A corner from the left came to Crossley but his right-foot drive from the left edge of the box zipped past Macleod's left-hand post. Four minutes later Fraser Macleod was clear on the right, but from 18 metres his shot went straight to the keeper; then a "Gochan" run on the right saw his high deep cross travel to Crossley on the left but it was too awkward to control and his volley went high past on the left.

On 57 minutes came final opportunities for the Bacachs to rescue themselves, Chris Macleod being supplied on the left, turning in and shooting low from 22 metres, but it drifted past on Beaton's right. Then Murray Macleod managed to win the ball towards the left touchline but his low diagonal swept across the Carloway box, 12 metres out, just too fast and out of reach for the arriving Maclean. Moments later it was all over: a "Sqweg" free-kick from the left halfway line was met by Mackay and a defender 14 metres out on the right of goal, broke back off the Bacach to Macaulay on the right of the penalty spot, and he sent in a high looping header which James Macleod appeared to gather on the goal-line, beneath the right crossbar, under pressure from Fraser Macleod, then unexpectedly allowed the slippery ball to drop free behind him into the net (**3-0**).

Na Gormaich now seemed to think the job was done and surrendered territory easily, inviting Back forward, no doubt trusting to hit on the break. On 71 minutes such a break occurred, 2-on-2, Fraz Mac zooming in on the right, but Macleod somehow blocked his drive from the right corner of the box, and Macaulay, arriving fast in the centre, had already overshot the rebound and could only flick the spinning ball past. Two minutes later, however, a "Sqweg" free-kick 16 metres from the bye-line, outside the box, arrived high in a crowded 6-metre box, then broke back of Moody and a defender for Crossley to lunge forward and force it home with his head (**4-0**).

On 75 minutes a sweeping Back move down the left saw Murray Macleod send a low ball across the retreating line to "Mowgli" free in the centre, but he sliced wide of Beaton's left-hand post from just outside the box. On 82 minutes it was "Barra's" turn to break forward into the Back half, right of centre, play right to "Sqweg", then continue to touch on the return diagonal across goal to an unmarked Fraz Mac, lurking 16 metres out on the left. He trapped the ball, looked up, then sent a fast low right-footer through the unfortunate Macleod's legs (**5-0**). But Back's agony was not yet over: after the substitute fired a chance on the right straight at Beaton from 18 metres, the Blues broke once more down the right, won a corner, and Craig Hacker's neatly flighted ball was met by Fraser Macleod on a crowded goal-line to head home in front of Macleod (**6-0**).

Full-Time: Back 0 Carloway 6.

What a difference six months can make. Last September at Garrabost, Back fielded a weakened side, yet Carloway, though dominating territory and possession for long periods, could not break down a brilliantly marshalled defence, generalled by Ross Hall, and ably assisted by "Ox", "Gress", D.J., and "Tohan". Tonight, that defence was largely absent and na Gormaich contrived to create chance after chance as Back struggled to contain a varied attack, led by their erstwhile striker, Fraser Macleod, who almost won the Coop Cup for them last September.

No side, least of all an island side, loses that quality and depth of resource in such a short period as Back have, without effect. The remaining stalwarts - D.J. Macdonald, the Macleods: "Mowgli", Chris, Jason, and Murray - toiled and ran endlessly, but without real cohesion or penetration, despite the continual machinations of Murray Macleod to unlock the door. However, as Back's star wanes, on the face of this, Carloway's seems to be rising: 7 straight victories and no obvious weaknesses on the night. And this without main animateur, Billy Anderson, who reluctantly spent the evening pacing the line.

The arrival of Fraz Mac and return of Scott Macaulay appears to have elevated a pretty useful side into a winning side, whose main concerns this season appear to be, at present, not so much oppositions but staying fit and available and remaining on the island; depth of pool could also figure highly, as it must do for every Island team. The Carloway system places enormous responsibility on the boundless energy of "Gochan" and Dan Crossley running the lines; the pace and decisive strike-power of Fraz Mac reacting off the powerful artifice of Scott Macaulay; a potent midfield blanket suffocating the enemy and forcing forward drift; and the defensive nous of Gus Maciver keeping it tight and safe at the back. On any given evening, when all these elements gel, and *esprit de corps* is high, Carloway metamorphose into the best the island has produced, the Lochs of 2005-9. Finding another Andy Murray would confirm this.

Back Man of the Match: Murray Macleod.

Carloway Man of the Match: Scott Macaulay.