

Lewis and Harris League:

Athletic 0 (0) Carloway 3 (2)

*Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod 8
Fraser Macleod 32
Kevin "Gochan" Macleod 63*

At Goathill Park.

Monday, 22.7.13.

Ref.: Stuart Macleod.

Standside line judge: Billy Macdonald.

Farside line judge: Euan Macaskill.

David Beaton

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

*Seumas Macleod Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Billy Anderson ☒ Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod
Dan Crossley*

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Fraser Macleod

*Subs.: Kevin "Gochan" Macleod (Dan Crossley) 45; Kenny "Beag" MacIennan (Billy
Anderson) 68; Scott Macaulay (Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald) 69.*

Subs. not used: Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur; Craig Hacker.

Yellow cards: Calum Tom Moody 37; Billy Anderson 39; Donald "D.I." MacIennan 79.

"When the going gets tough, the tough get going" is a popular saying and Mohammed certainly met the mountain tonight. After one or two of his premiership-winning years, Sir Alex Ferguson once said that success had not really been down to winning more of the "big" games than their rivals (where Man.Utd.'s head-to-head-score had not been all that great), but season-long care in not dropping points against the so-called "lesser" teams.

In a close-run, 9-team League, like the Lewis and Harris, of course, the danger for Carloway, Athletic, and West Side is to assume that other sides like Lochs, Point, Back, etc. don't deserve maximum attention and they simply have to turn up, play the ball around a while, and it will regularly end up in the net. Yet there is no denying that tonight was the setting for the first of four mighty encounters that might go a long way to deciding the eventual destination of the Championship trophy.

Next, West and Athletic are to collide on August 5 at Barvas and in a rearranged fixture at Goathill later, while na Gormaich and the Siarachs must meet at Barvas on Friday, August 16th. A must for the diary!

Results already for the Blues this Season against the Stornoway side have been encouraging: in the ABC Cup SF here, on 1st May, a Fraser Macleod hat-trick had capped a disciplined team performance, while in the reverse League encounter at Cnoc a' Choilich on 26th June, two late goals from Domhnall Mackay and Fraz Mac (pen.) had resolved a thrilling stalemate, giving the Blues an edge in the Title race.

Tonight the managerial team were spoiled for choice: only Kevin "Barra" Macneill was injured, and Domhnall Mackay, Kevin "Gochan" Macleod, Craig Hacker, and Scott Macaulay were again available, though Scott still carried

that nagging knee injury, and was not risked from the start. Dan Crossley started, despite rough treatment on Saturday, and a welcome visitor to the bench was Kenny "Beag" MacIennan, back on the island, alongside Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur (who made way for Domhnall Mackay in midfield), "Gochan", and Craig Hacker; Ben Smith was on standby. Seumas Macleod continued to Mackay's right, and 5-goal hero, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, remained up front. The squad looked formidable.

Athletic were much changed from the ABC SF: Murdo "Mojo" Maclean is now, of course, at Ness, while Steven Clinton, Jason Maclean, and Nic "Nuck" Davis did not start. Unfortunately for the Blues, the usual pains in the posterior - Eliot Rudall, the midfield enforcer, and D.J. Clinton, animateur to his left, featured, with Hammer of the Blues, Scott Maciver, leading. A returning worry was the troublesome presence of Robert Jones steaming through the centre, and the addition of Carlway EaF star, Stuart "Bubble" Macdonald (lately from United), in midfield; ex-Blues, Ross Macrae and Donnie Macphail, also featured.

A beautiful, windless, AND midgie-free evening saw no preliminary niceties; it was out of the traps and straight for each others' throats. Immediately, an Athletic corner to Beaton's left allowed a free header by the far post, 10 metres out, but it sailed safely into the keeper's arms. Two minutes later, an Anderson free-kick to the left, 22 metres from goal, cleared the bar by a metre.

It was a breathless, no-nonsense, no-quarter-given opening: no La Liga build-ups; instant clearances long or out of the park; repeated use of the long pass forward or diagonal to release wing-men or strikers; reminiscent of Murray v. Djokovic at Wimbledon three weeks ago, with no forgiveness for the fluffed lay-off.

Suddenly, out of nothing, Carlway broke the ice: after 8 minutes, Crossley forced his way down the left past three defenders, then cut the ball square low and hard across goal, 12 metres from the bye-line. It broke out for "Dokus" to meet in the centre, outside the box, and square immediately left, to "Sqweg" moving forward into the left corner of the box. Without breaking stride, he crashed a right-foot drive over and round Macritchie and into his top-left corner. An exquisite clean strike (0-1).

The tempo did not slow one iota, nor did the style of play alter. On 16 minutes a corner on Beaton's right was met by Maciver directly in front of goal, 12 metres out, but he lifted his header a metre over. Five minutes later D.J. tricked his way down the left and his square cut-back across the line was won by Jones coming towards him to take one step inwards to his left and send a left-foot sizzler rocketting inches over the bar. A minute later and it was Gary Macleod's turn to meet a low cross from the right, 16 metres out on the left, but his drive went well over the bar. Immediately another fast Aths' break, on the right, led to a low sweeping cross from the corner flag being missed by everyone, before being met by D.J. by the far post, 14 metres out, but he also cleared the bar by a metre.

Finally, on 26 minutes, Carloway surprised the hosts as "Dokus" broke through the centre, then released low and wide to Seumas Macleod racing down the right; he wasted no time in squaring to Fraser Macleod racing clear into the right of the box, but the angle was tight and Macritchie blocked his drive solidly at the near post. On the half-hour a long high ball saw Maciver race to challenge Beaton as the keeper reached for the ball, sending him crashing to earth and the ball spinning into the net, but the referee blew instantly, and the protest, except by the striker, was half-hearted.

A minute later and a few moments of Crossley dribbling magic saw him run the entire left-side of the Athletic half, leaving defenders behind like a comet's tail, cut in along the bye-line, then from the narrowest of angles slot a drive past the advancing keeper. However, "Koch" (?) somehow managed to boot clear off the line. A minute later and a bit of inspiration from Seumas Macleod saw him move fast down the left and square along the 18-metre line to "Dokus" who in turn wasted no time in sending a low, right-foot drive to Macritchie's left. Incredibly, the keeper got down like lightning to block the ball with the fingertips of his left hand; but he could not hold it and it spun outwards across goal and, instantly, the deadliest predator on the isles snapped forward out of the long grass and slotted home from 12 metres (0-2).

The midfield battle now became heated and in 36 minutes, a free-kick disputed mightily by Moody, 24 metres out on the left, led to Macleod's neat delivery being head-lobbed out, and Maciver turning on the 18-metre line and falling backwards, sent a delightful overhead kick curling over Beaton but just over the bar.

Half-time: Athletic 0 Carloway 2

Despite the two-goal cushion, there was barely a glimmer of light between the sides, as phases of dominance and reasonable, though not clear-cut, chances had repeatedly alternated. The teams were perfectly-matched and, to a certain extent, were cancelling each other out. Instant, accurate reactions had registered twice.

With everything clearly still to play for, Athletic's opening twenty-minute assault in the second half resembled Hitler's blitzkrieg on Russia in 1941. For 20 minutes they tried everything to disturb the equilibrium of a watertight Carloway back-line and fail-safe goalkeeper. On 48 minutes Jones broke down the right and his squared ball 12 metres from the bye-line broke out to the edge of the box but was hurriedly snatched well-wide. Two minutes later an Athletic free-kick from the centre-line was met at Beaton's right-hand post, 12 metres out, and headed square across but Beaton got across to meet a Daniel Macleod strike at his left-hand post and grasp the elusive ball as he fell to his right.

Na Gormaich replied when Moody tried his luck with a free-kick from 24 metres but his hard low strike was read perfectly by Macritchie. This led on

right away to an incredible melée in the Blues' box before the last of several blocks saw the ball break to the edge of the box, only to be fired well-wide of Beaton's right-hand post. On the hour a "Dokus" drive from 18 metres rebounded to him but his second attempt was deflected over. An Anderson corner from the left was then reverse-headed by Moody, 10 metres out from the far post, but crept untouched past Macritchie's right-hand post.

Three minutes later, the Blues took a mighty step towards the points. A move down the right freed "Sgweg" by the corner flag and his high deep cross found "Gochan" ghosting in from the left to head down hard from 12 metres to within the base of the keeper's right-hand post. Macritchie seemed to have it but the ball somehow squirmed out of his hands and trickled into the corner of the net (0-3).

A moment later it was almost four, when the next Carloway surge was headed out to the right edge of the box and an enormous up-and-under from "Sqweg" came thundering down on to the top of the bar and over. Still the contest raged on, but as Athletic desperately sought an avenue back, their forward commitment left dangerous gaps at the back. On 66 minutes "Dokus" broke left, checked, then from midway within the Aths' half hooked a high curler over the retreating "Koch" for Fraz Mac to take perfectly on his instep, on the 18 metre-line, but lift a shade too high over the advancing Macritchie and the bar.

In the last 20 minutes na Gormaich had clearly settled for what they had, inviting Athletic forward, then breaking fast, high, and wide, when occasion permitted. Still Athletic were denied a clear view of goal, however, until the 73rd minute when a piece of "Bubble" trickery outside the left corner of the Blues' box saw him cleverly flick the ball up and backwards over his marker, then neatly lift the ball over Beaton but also over the far junction of bar and post. Three minutes later and a Macleod free-kick from the right centre-line was headed on by Maciver from 16 metres but travelled straight to Beaton.

On 82 minutes the keeper had to be at his best when a flowing Aths' move down the right was played across the line of the box but the final drive was brilliantly pushed away by Beaton at full stretch to his right, then booted into the nearest garden.

The end was in sight when Carloway signed off with two glorious chances: on 87 minutes Macaulay reprised "Dokus's" artistry from earlier and again Fraser Macleod brought the descending ball down perfectly just inside the box but Macritchie stationed himself correctly to collect his finish. In the final minute a Carloway corner on Macritchie's left was met by Seumas Macleod, 12 metres out by the near post, but his bullet-header cannoned off the the top half of the bar and over.

Full-time: Athletic 0 (0) Carloway 3 (2)

So, in one season, a third victory over the Champions; eight goals scored; none conceded. Who would ever have thought that the Blues were capable of

denying perennial bête noire, Scott Maciver, over 270 minutes? This physical, high-speed, and at times brutal encounter was as draining and unforgiving to experience as a Lewis winter. How the participants themselves felt afterwards should not even be imagined, although each looked by the end as if they had been heated by a white-hot blow-lamp, then hit by a giant fire hose.

Carloway's route to success rested upon re-discovered first half-of-season tactical form. This manifested itself in a water-tight defensive line, a faultless display in anticipation and safe handling from David Beaton, and the adamant life-force of Gus Maciver, apparently hewn out of the Lewisian gneiss itself, cajoling and bullying this back-line.

Athletic performed no worse than the Blues and constructed as many chances, but despite the repeated invention of Robert Jones, D.J. Clinton, Gary Macleod, and Scott Maciver, later Donnie Macphail, and the drive of Eliot Rudall, they were not as clear-cut chances nor had they the opportunity to linger as long on their options. Also, they didn't have the constant irritant of a Usain Bolt-type figure continually cropping up in open spaces that you did not know existed in your defence, and thus repeatedly distorting your shape, and giving others that extra nanosecond to pick a spot or break.

Gus Maciver and Fraser Macleod give the Carloway middle the chance to breathe, and with Dan Crossley and "Dokus" keeping the line wide, Seumas Macleod constantly threatening in support, long ball football was often a necessity for Athletic, not a style of play. What happens next will be interesting.

Athletic Man of the Match: Stuart "Bubble" Macdonald.

Carloway Man of the Match: Gus Maciver.

	Pd.	W.	D.	L.	F.	A.	+/-	Pts.
CARLOWAY	11	10	1	0	41	9	32	31
Westside	9	7	0	2	41	9	32	21
Stornoway Athletic	9	7	0	2	37	12	25	21
Lochs	10	6	0	4	32	27	5	18
Point	10	5	2	3	22	12	10	17
Back	11	5	0	6	21	17	4	15
Ness	10	2	1	7	25	37	-12	7
Stornoway United	9	1	0	8	8	38	-30	3
Harris	10	0	0	10	5	71	-66	0

As at 22nd July 2013