

Lewis and Harris League:

Lochs 1 (0) Carloway 1 (1)

Jonathan Smith 86

Jack Buchanan 20

At Creagan Dubh.

Monday, 14.4.14

Ref.: Kenneth 'Bugsy' Smith.

David Beaton

Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Gus Maciver Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur

Leigh Johnson Billy Anderson ☒ Dan Crossley Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod Archie
Macdonald

Fraser Macleod Jack Buchanan

Subs.: Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (Billy Anderson) 58; Kevin "Barra" Macneil (Jack
Buchanan) 72.

Subs. not used: Gordon Craigie; Chris "Christy" Smith; Josh Harris.

Yellow card: Billy Anderson 48.

Which task would most people say is harder? To win a League Championship or to defend one? Fighting your way to the summit, or withstanding those who wish to knock you off it? Very few players ever get the chance to find out, although David Macmillan *et al* will certainly know, from the glory years, stretching from 2003-10. However, it's a new experience for the boys in Blue, hopefully one that will become regular, and the quality of the 2014 side will be stringently judged according to the vigour of this title defence.

Movements in and out of any squad, especially those on the island, are inevitable, and fundamental changes have been forced on new managerial team, manager Graeme "Windy" Miller, and his assistant, club captain, Domhnall Mackay. Further to force-of-nature Seumas Macleod's departure late in the 2013 campaign, three of the basic building blocks of na Gormaich success last season have gone: the best header of the ball on the island, the stylish Calum Tom Moody, ironically moving to tonight's opponents; *trequantista* Scott Macaulay off-island; and the unclassifiable winger/striker, the explosive Kevin "Gochan" Macleod, though the last has agreed to make himself available occasionally. Apparently, there are too many fish to be caught this year.

On the positive side, additions included the Niseach pair, ace winger/striker Leigh Johnson and developing star, Josh Harris, and returning from Uist and Iochdar Saints, killer-striker Archie Macdonald. Tonight there was the further blow of suspension for defensive rock, Donald "D.I." MacIennan, at left-back, though leg problems would have ruled him out regardless - a problem seemingly endemic to island football.

Witness last season's extensive absences for Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald and Scott Macaulay among others because of this same ailment. Leurbost stalwart, Peter Mackenzie, an irreplaceable feature of the Lochs defence, was playing tonight despite similar problems; there was also a welcome return for Robert Mackenzie in midfield, but the best young striker on Lewis, Johnny

Smith, was not risked from the start by the Maroons because of - you've guessed it - knee concerns. Not that that made matters any easier for the Blues" new back three of Mackay, Maciver, and Macarthur, who still had to face 24-goal man, Angie Campbell, and perennial pain-in-the-neck, Donald "Nomie" Macdonald.

How the boys in blue must hate the latter, as yet again, tonight, he turned in another classic Wiltford performance, especially in the first half: twisting and turning/moving off marker/making oceans of space for himself/providing, etc. Fortunately for Carloway, there were few takers.

A beautiful calm evening for football greeted a huge crowd here at Creagan Dubh (the ones that managed to get a parking place within walking distance, that is); and the pitch looked in excellent condition, as Carloway set the home side a first half task of opening uphill into the setting sun. Every confrontation between these two quality sides now follows a predictable pattern where each respects the opposition, passes the ball around, retains possession - and territory, and is ultra-careful. This minimises opportunities, of course.

Opening season rustiness was apparent in each team's movement. A lack of cohesion led to an indecisive first 20 minutes which, however, did provide a few sudden chances, a breaking ball on the left on 6 minutes, allowing a "Nomie" snapshot from 20 metres, but Beaton was untroubled. After 9 minutes two exquisite defence-breakers opened the Lochs' defence for the Carloway front-men: as "Sqweg" fell backwards under a challenge on the left halfway line, he hooked the ball forward diagonally rightwards over his head for a bursting Fraser Macleod to outpace his marker, Roddie Morrison, but lose control on the edge of the area. A minute later Jack Buchanan chased back to regain a lost ball, 22 metres out in the centre, then turned leftwards to send a golden daisy-cutter inside Moody for the Uibhisteach to carry to the bye-line, then whip low across goal. Crossley came in like an express-train to meet it perfectly on the right, 14 metres out, but the ball flew back across goal and wide. After 16 minutes Anderson headed on a high clearance for Frazmac once more to outpace the back-line on the right, carry into the area, then almost burst a hole in Cameron Houston's left side-netting.

Despite pace and good play promising eventual success for na Gormaich, the goal, when it did arrive, is perhaps best forgotten. On 20 minutes Domhnall Mackay and Angie Campbell tussled for the ball just inside the Carloway half on the right, and as Campbell struggled to keep the ball in play, Mackay blasted it forward towards Houston. Mackenzie shepherded it carefully towards his keeper, but 10 metres out, as Houston momentarily hesitated to pick the ball up, Buchanan nipped in between them, carried the ball to the right bye-line, then stroked it home behind two very red faces **(0-1)**.

A shaken Lochie defence almost compounded this disaster five minutes later with a misplaced back pass, which again allowed the champion predator on the island, "Frazmac", to once more blaze into the box, this time on the left, but this time Houston reacted like lightning to make himself big, and as the ball broke off him inwards, Buchanan's follow-up crashed off assembled

Maroons' defenders and spun off wildly to the left.

Lochs eventually regained their equilibrium and as the half progressed gradually asserted themselves in midfield; but the chances were to disappear - for both sides. On the stroke of half-time an untidy skirmish just outside the right corner of the Carloway box led to a push-and-shove contest between David Macmillan and Billy Anderson, rapidly defused by team-mates - and a Lochs free-kick, not the most insightful thing to give away in that position with dead-ball magician, Macmillan, around. However, the ball came back off the wall, though Moody did manage to beat two men to his left and squeeze a low, hard shot in off the rebound but it went straight to Beaton.

Half-Time: **Lochs 0 Carloway 1**

It might not have been the best football half ever witnessed, but it certainly had been hugely entertaining as two of the main contenders for honours this season had undergone 45 minutes of fine-tuning for the season ahead. Despite Andy Murray's and Macmillan's best promptings, Lochs' main problem had been an inability to create many goal-scoring opportunities against a fearsome in-your-eye Gus Maciver; Carloway's problem had been failure to take the chances a dominant midfield and pacy attack had created.

On 50 minutes a Jim O'Donnell free-kick from 20 metres spun inwards off the wall and only a crunching Maciver tackle blocked the danger. Two minutes later, a classic up-and-over from Anderson on the right saw Fraser Macleod spin clear off his marker but Houston read his chip from 16 metres and made himself 7 feet tall to grasp.

A moment later, a defining moment in the game arrived with Johnny Smith replacing Robert Mackenzie, who appeared to be struggling. "Nomie" dropped back to compensate and the dream trio of Murray/"Nomie"/Macmillan began to establish a Maroon take-over in midfield. On 58 minutes an exquisite reverse through pass from Andy Murray, turning right outside the Carloway box, found Campbell unmarked, moving rightwards 16 metres from goal, but his curling shot just crept over the bar.

Unfortunately for the Blues, playmaker, Billy Anderson, now departed, but this permitted **Kenny "Dokus" MacDonald to come on for his 300th appearance for Carloway**. Congratulations, Kenny! However, the flow of the game was now inexorably towards David Beaton. On 62 minutes a spate of "Nomie" corners on the Lochs' left led to the third being knocked clear to the edge of the box, where Peter Robbie Mackenzie whacked in a swirling left-foot lob that was twisting just inside Beaton's top-left corner, before the keeper managed to scramble along his line and claw it away miraculously for yet another corner. On 64 minutes a clever "Dokus" diagonal to his left freed Macdonald to move into the box, check, then try to place a careful shot round Houston inside his far post, but the keeper did well to palm it away.

Chances were now materializing regularly for the Maroons: on 67 minutes Campbell met a breaking ball out of defence to send a screamer wide of

Beaton's left from 20 metres; then Crossley had to block Macmillan for a corner low at his right goalmouth. On 75 minutes Lochs must have felt their moment had come - and gone. Out by the Lochs' left touchline, midway within the Carloway half, "Nomie" sent in a perfect Martin Peters special which seemed to go over and through a Blues' defence, which parted like the Red Sea for an unmarked Campbell to meet. Agonisingly, he just could not get the correct angle on his header and it flew over.

A moment later and "Sqweg" once more sent the perfect ball over an over-committed back-line for "Frazmac" to steam on to, but once again Houston was out hyper-smartish to spread himself like a handball goalkeeper and block the pile-drive expertly with his left shoulder. Three minutes later he almost undid his own good play with a mishit clearance, but "Dokus's" attempted lob cleared the keeper and drifted wide of his left-hand post.

Finally, on 86 minutes, Lochs got the equalizer their second half display had threatened, and, indeed, warranted. Wouldn't you know it? The head of Calum Tom Moody just had to meet a Macmillan free-kick 14 metres out in front of goal. Again, Beaton was on hand to make a superlative save to his left, but Smith was lurking in prime position to squeeze the rebound home under the keeper (1-1).

An unprecedented 6½ minutes added-on time gave the Blues the chance to steal victory when the second of two Crossley corners on the left fell to "Frazmac" but he scooped the ball over the bar.

Full-Time: Lochs 1 Carloway 1

A game of two halves, as they say, with Carloway edging the first; Lochs establishing ascendancy in the second. Both sides will be pleased, and displeased, by aspects of their performance tonight. The midfield control of Dan Crossley, backed by the game overview of demon *animateur*, Billy Anderson, and tackling colossus, "Sqweg", exploited the pace of Jack Buchanan and "Frazmac" throughout the first half, occasionally in the second. Calum Tom Moody, Peter Mackenzie, and Roddie Morrison spent the half trying to get to grips with this challenge, which in turn prevented them pushing forward regularly to assist Jim O'Donnell, Peter Robbie, and Robert Mackenzie and they, in turn, were too often drawn deep, allowing Leigh Johnson and Archie Macdonald to push forward wide and spread the back-line thinner in the centre repeatedly.

David Macmillan and Andy Murray, likewise, drove forward relentlessly to support Angie Campbell and "Nomie", but initially it wasn't working up front for the Maroons as a game-on Gus Maciver and clear-eyed David Beaton marshalled their defence faultlessly. However, a lack of sharpness up front, understandable perhaps in the first competitive game of the season, eventually cost Carloway dear, as despite the fact everyone performed well and cannot be criticized - debutantes, Jack Buchanan, Leigh Johnson, and Archie Macdonald all turning in first-rate performances - an astute substitution in 53 minutes changed the course of the game.

From then on the classic triumvirate of Murray, Macdonald, and Macmillan delivered a masterclass, with a reprise performance of the type of form everyone on the island knows so well. Thankfully for the Blues, the "Lava" and David Martin of old were not around tonight also. On this evidence, both sides have more than a fair chance of being among the honours again this season.

Lochs Man of the Match: David Macmillan.

Carloway Man of the Match: Domhnall Mackay.