

Coop Cup: Round 1:

## **Benbecula 2 (2) Carloway 4 (1)**

*Hector Macphee 27 (pen.), 43 Fraser Macleod 3, 82*

*Josh Harris 56*

*Archie Macdonald 65*

*Saturday, 24th May.*

*At Lionacleit.*

*Ref.: Roddie Steele.*

*Gordon Craigie*

*Donald "D.I." Macennan. Gus Maciver. Cameron "Tiger" MacArthur*

*Leigh Johnson Phil Macleod Dan Crossley Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod Archie Macdonald*

*Fraser Macleod. Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (capt)*

*Subs.: Josh Harris (Leigh Johnson) 29; Ross Maciver (Dan Crossley) 71; Euan Macleod (Archie Macdonald) 78.*

*Sub. not used: Ross "Tiny" Maclean.*

*Yellow card: Donald "D.I." Macleannan 75.*

For the second consecutive week, Carloway had to head south to the islands where, over the years, they've experienced the odd glorious victory (e.g. 9-3 over Eriskay last year); but also, abject nightmare (e.g. 4-7 to Southend in 2008). The Blues might perform well on the mainland, but rarely on the machair of these islands. No Carlowegian fondly remembers a gloriously sunny day in May '08, when a guy called Roddy Campbell delivered a masterclass in finishing. Ah, well.

Nevertheless, after last-minute blues at Garrabost on May 5th, courtesy of Alex Macdonald's boot, followed four days later by a comprehensive ABC mauling by Westside, na Gormaich had responded ultra-positively, thrashing both town sides on either side of grinding out HAC victory here last week against a stubborn Barra side. More of this would suffice today - a first victory over a Benbecula side struggling in the Uist & Barra League but who had inflicted 1-3 defeats on na Gormaich in their three previous encounters, the last in the HAC in 2007.

Survivors from that day remained in the squad - Gordon Craigie, Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod, and Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald - but there were other regulars missing today: the unavailable Domhnall Mackay, Kevin "Barra" Macneill, and David Beaton, while overnight sickness ruled out Jack Buchanan. Billy Anderson was still injured. Such absences caused tactical change, not anguish. The evergreen Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie started between the sticks, while Phil Macleod made Captain Courageous's absence

tolerable, with Kenny Dokus" Macdonald captaining and pushing forward to partner Fraser Macleod. Leigh Johnson started, despite week-long sickness. The bench was occupied by emerging stars: Josh Harris; Ross Maciver; Euan Macleod; and Ross "Tiny" Maclean. Ex-Blue, Jamie Macdonald, faced them in right midfield, while über-dangerous striker, Hector Macphee, ex-Back, was, as expected, to prove a 90-minute pain-in-the-neck.

In a reprise of last week, an explosive opening gave Carloway false promise that the job was half-done immediately: a broken ball in midfield was seized on by "Sqweg" to surge forward through the centre and into the Benbecula half. Midway in, he sent a glorious Jimmy Macilroy leftwards, low between back and stopper, for Fraser Macleod to glide forward on to. Though Thomas Steele reacted fast to block, "Frazmac" recovered well to carry the loose ball onward behind the keeper to the left and slot home across a defender and within the far post (**0-1**).

The early lead naturally unsettled the game-plan of the home side and delivered the initiative to Carloway. After a quick Macgillivray break on the right led to a sharp cross, then header, into Craigie's arms from 14 metres, the Blues surged forward. Again, "Sqweg" initiated the move, feeding Johnson in the inside left position, 25 metres from goal. He in turn slipped it right, for "Frazmac", facing his own goal, to neatly flick it on to the unmarked "Dokus", bursting in on the right of the box, but from 16 metres he slammed the ball just outside the near post.

Sustained pressure led to three dangerous in-swinging "Sqweg" corners on the left, the second met square by Crossley, but his header, directly in front of goal, 14 metres out, was booted clear off the line. Benbecula responded with a corner on Craigie's right which cleared everyone, to reach an unmarked attacker, 12 metres out by the far post, but he was unable to connect properly and the ball trundled past harmlessly. Two minutes later Macleod, midway within the BB half, once more released "Dokus" diagonally right. His low cross from the touch-line was too hot for Steele to hold, but the loose ball in the 6-metre box was thwacked wildly away for a corner.

A familiar tactical pattern was emerging: Carloway with territorial advantage and ball possession, adopting the *totalvoetbal* approach, seeking the elusive opening; Benbecula absorbing pressure, marking doggedly, creating the fast break, centrally and wide. Then, suddenly, in the 27th minute, the action veered rapidly off-script, something it has a habit of doing in the Southern Isles when Carloway are around. A lofted ball forward saw MacIennan and Macphee clash just inside the box centrally, then fall in a heap, the ball breaking diagonally backwards beyond "Tiger" to Craigie's left. The unmarked Macgillivray came charging in like an express train to squander the chance by

thundering the ball low into the near side-netting from 14 metres. The referee appeared to award a goal-kick, then, as confusion spread, it became clear he was pointing at the spot. Why? No loud appeal had been made, but it soon emerged that "D.I." had been adjudged to have raised a boot too high, making contact with Macphee's head.

Maciver had to be calmed down as Carloway's protests escalated. No matter! Bang! The coolest man on the field, Macphee, practically uprooted Craigie's back stanchion as he dispatched the perfect penalty low inside Craigie's right-hand post, giving the keeper no chance (1-1).

The challenge immediately became even more difficult with the loss of the enterprising Johnson, brave to even start, and it was the 38th minute before the Blues eventually threatened Steele again with another neat break, this time on the left, as Crossley broke through the centre, with "Sqweg" in support; he split the back-line left, for Macdonald to reach 20 metres from goal, on the left touch-line, then send the sweetest of deep crosses dropping on to the arriving Frazmac, directly in front of goal, but his header from 10 metres, was blocked and held, at the second attempt, by the keeper.

However, two minutes from the break, the wheels really came off the Carloway bogey, when a sudden BB break out of defence on the left saw a lofted diagonal forward and to the right just clear the retreating Blues' back-line for Macphee to weigh up, then calmly lift a careful lob over the advancing Craigie from 20 metres to bounce just inside the keeper's right-hand post (2-1).

Which motion picture best suited na Gormaich's predicament? Was it "*Groundhog Day*"? More like "*Time After Time*", as the same old suffering seemed to engulf the entire Carloway contingent.

### **Half-time: Benbecula 2 Carloway 1**

The ebullient high-jinks of the trip south were already distant memories, no doubt, as the half-time Bovril was distributed. What advice could be given to a squad who generally had performed on-message, maintained their shape in occasional adversity, but simply had not delivered in the end third of the field? Up the pace, perhaps, a difficult requirement on the permanently one-inch too-long grass of Lionacleit.

Immediately, any half-time encouragement almost became irrelevant, when Carloway confusion midway within their own half on their right led to a whipped low cross reaching Macphee in the centre on the edge of the box. His instant hard right-footer was low and true through the line but, incredibly,

Craigie got down late to divert the ball at full stretch with both hands, round his right-hand post. What a save! If that had gone in! It was definitely a get-out-of-jail moment.

Fortunately, the Blues soon regained their equilibrium and the La Liga approach recommenced. Finally, in the 56th minute a glimmer of light appeared: "Sqweg" won the ball just inside the Carloway half on the left, then supplied Crossley coming through the middle at pace. He in turn dispatched the ball perfectly, forward and to the right, over and beyond Macinnes to Macleod, on the edge of the box, and he found Harris to his right moving into the box. He drove inside his marker but 12 metres from goal, the keeper dived to block. The ball ricocheted back and forth; Harris won it, lost it, won it a second time, then stroked the ball across goal and home (2-2).

Na Gormaich now piled forward. On the hour a Macdonald corner on the left was headed clear, but headed back in by "Tiger", 22 metres out on the left of the box. Crossley met it 16 metres from goal but his header cleared the bar by a metre. Moments later, however, a BB break down the left led to a low cross along the edge of the Carloway box which eluded everyone to reach Macphee in front of goal. Once more he drove the sweetest of right-footers low to Craigie's right, but again the keeper threw himself to his right and delivered a brilliant one-hand save at full stretch. Hector could not believe his eyes!

It was a turning point in the game because three minutes later the ball was pushed forward to Macdonald, on the left touch-line midway within the Benbecula half. The Uibhisteach made to run, checked back to make space for himself, then sent a high, searching lob/cross diagonally forward. At first, Steele appeared to have it covered as it dropped on him, but the gusty wind suddenly carried the high ball leftwards, then it dropped like a stone, and crept in low, just inside his left-hand post (2-3).

Not quite a clanger, but one to forget, with strong similarities to Crossley's remarkable strike at Fivepenny in 2013. A minute later the keeper redeemed himself, diving bravely at Harris's feet 14 metres from goal, after smart Crossley/"Frazmac" interplay had released him on the right. In the 70th minute a neat "Dokus" diagonal found Macdonald on the left, but his cross from the left touch-line, 20 metres from goal, was headed just over by Crossley.

Generally, Benbecula were struggling to make an impression up front, even though Carloway now lost shape and momentum with the departure of Crossley and Macdonald. However, in the 82nd minute it was all over when "Sqweg" played forward to "Dokus", moving through the centre and into the

BB half. He then stroked a golden splitter between stopper and right back for "Frazmac" to ghost on to and into the box. Again, Steele was out like lightning to block. "Frazmac" won it back, was blocked again by an arriving defender, won it, carried it to his left, then stroked it wide of the man on the line and just inside the far post (2-4).

In the last few moments "Sqweg" found Macleod on the right and his searching cross, 20 metres from goal, was controlled beautifully by "Dokus", but his shot from 18 metres flew over the BB left-hand post. However, the Craigie masterclass wasn't quite over yet. Right on the whistle a square cross from the left touch-line, 16 metres from goal, was met in the centre by a header, low to Craigie's right, but again the keeper got down superbly, this time to smother.

### **Full-time: Benbecula 2 Carloway 4**

Well, they got there in the end, although the travelling support - and, no doubt, the management team - had to endure a prolonged period of suffering, from the 27th to the 56th minute, when the game appeared to be drifting out of na Gormaich's control into midfield stalemate. Not that anyone was under-performing or posted missing, nor the tactical approach ineffective. Indeed, the La Liga approach along the back-line out of defence, into and around midfield, established major territorial control and kept Macphee, Macgillivray, *et al* far from Craigie for significant periods. Yet this successful stylistic method, ironically, with its patient and insightful build-up, allowed the Southerners time to anticipate, group early, and repel, before unleashing the ball wide or to an unquenchable striker.

Danger, however, was created instantly when true game-readers like "Sqweg" and Dan Crossley looked up, thought, and sent the killer Charlie Gallaghers to the breaking "Frazmac", surging wide or centrally, and, occasionally, to "Dokus".

Benbecula, perhaps, took na Gormaich by surprise with their close marking, dogged defending/tackling, and fast breaks, but Carloway generally handled them competently, controlling the flow of the game throughout, and did recover from heart-stopping adversity to eventually neutralize their opponents. Injury and match fitness now seem greater causes for concern than team performance.

**Benbecula Man of the Match: Hector Macphee.**

**Carloway Man of the Match: Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod.**