

Jock Stein Cup: Round 1:

Lochs 3 (2) Carloway 1 (1)

Peter Mackenzie 29

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 18

Don "Lava" Macleod 36, 90+1

Monday, 2nd June.

At Creagan Dubh, Leurbost

Ref.: Stuart Macleod.

David Beaton

Donald "D.I." MacLennan Gus Maciver □ Cameron "Tiger" MacArthur

Kevin "Barra" Macneil Domhnall Mackay(capt) Billy Anderson Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod □ Dan Crossley

Jack Buchanan Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Subs.: Graham Thomson (Jack Buchanan) 72.

Subs. not used: Gordon Craigie; Euan Macleod; Joe Armstrong; Kevin Anderson.

Yellow cards: Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod 67; Gus Maciver 81.

Jonathan Smith Don "Lava" Macleod

Daniel "Nipper" Mackenzie Chris Mackay David Macmillan Angie Campbell Donald "Nomie" Macdonald

Roddie Morrison Calum Tom Moody Peter Mackenzie (capt)

Cameron Houston

Subs.: Andy Murray (David Macmillan) 65; Jim O'Donnell (Donald "Nomie" Macdonald) 72.

Seven weeks have passed since Carloway's opening League game of the 2014 season took place at Creagan Dubh, and significant changes in personnel, game-plan, and form were clearly displayed this evening. On April 14th the Blues arrived, determined to defend a Championship; tonight, it was to retain a cup. For Lochs, however, the aim was to begin the quest to regain their former ascendancy throughout the islands. On the evidence of tonight's tie, they are well on the way to doing just that.

In the League game a quicksilver Jack Buchanan had taken advantage of an early defensive mix-up to put the Blues into an early lead as na Gormaich edged the first hour in possession, territory, and chances; however, the arrival of Johnny Smith in 53 minutes had allowed Donald "Nomie" Macdonald to drop back to replace the injured Robert Mackenzie in midfield, alongside Andy Murray and David Macmillan, and the Maroons had gone on to control the final half-hour, Smith himself grabbing a deserved equalizer in the dying minutes.

After Saturday's titanic HAC victory at Goathill, leading, hopefully, to another exhilarating cup run to rival that of 2011, Carloway were visited by further selection misery, with Josh Harris ruled out for at least a fortnight with tissue damage and Leigh Johnson unavailable, due to work commitments in Uist. Fraser Macleod served the second of his three match suspension and was now off the radar, and an injured Archie Macdonald was also still unable to contribute. In addition, Ross Maciver was on duty for the under-18s on Tuesday and was not asked to feature. Nevertheless, the bench did have a distinct Western Thistle look to it - Graham Thomson, Euan Macleod, and Joe Armstrong - augmented by the presence of OAPs, Gordon Craigie and Kevin Anderson. On the plus side, David Beaton and Billy Anderson returned, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (who had notched up his 300th appearance for the Blues in the earlier 1-1 draw) continued to partner live-wire Buchanan up front, and Kevin "Barra" MacNeil made a welcome start, in Johnson's place, at right wing/half.

Lochs had their troubles too, with no Robert or Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie, and Andy Murray only making the bull-pen. However, the dreaded Smith started this time, up front alongside goal-machine, Don "Lava" Macleod (how many comebacks has this guy made?); and Angie Campbell dropped back to central midfield, to create a formidable support line with David Macmillan and "Nomie".

The battle for midfield supremacy - "Nomie"/Campbell/Macmillan v "Sqweg"/Anderson/Crossley

- began immediately. An initial Lochs push down their right led to a short "Nomie" corner back to his captain, and he, in turn, whipped across a square knee-high cross which was met by Moody, lurking at the near post, but his snap right-foot hook from 12 metres zipped a metre past the post. Two minutes later "Sqweg" won the ball in the centre and an Anderson breaker found Buchanan behind "Nipper" on the right. He took two steps before releasing a glorious inward diagonal behind the retreating back-line, for "Dokus" to ghost between Moody and Morrison in the centre. but from 20 metres Houston read his strike beautifully, low to his left.

On 14 minutes a speculative Anderson drive from 24 metres was safely held by the keeper high to his right, before a trademark Crossley run and cross provided the opener. A pinball melée in the Carloway box led to a mistimed tackle by "D.I.", before he recovered to boot clear. The ball deflected to Crossley, just inside his own half on the left, and he cut left and charged down the wing. He checked in the corner, managed to elude Mackenzie and Morrison, then crossed square and high along the box for "Dokus" to benefit from Moody being dragged right to cover, to glance the ball well-wide of Houston's left hand (0-1).

A minute later, a deep "Barra" cross from the right touch-line forced Houston to move smartly to flick the ball from just inside his right post/bar junction. However, in 20 minutes, over-confidence almost spelled disaster: with everyone penned in the Lochs half, the last man, Gus Maciver, tried to dribble the ball forward; Campbell stuck out a foot, won the ball, and the chase was on. Somehow, midway within his own half, Maciver managed to catch the speeding Lochie and slide a saving right foot in. In 23 minutes a Moody free-kick, from just inside his own half, was lifted high into the Blues' box, where it broke outwards to Beaton's right. It was driven back in low rightwards; Maclennan slipped; and an unhindered "Lava" smacked the ball low to Beaton's right from 10 metres. Amazingly, the advancing keeper stuck out a right leg as long as Callanish pier to block the ball brilliantly.

Nevertheless, the danger signs were now flashing for na Gormaich. As the Maroons' midfield cohered, they moved increasingly off their markers into open space, repeatedly feeding the irrepressible *raumdeuter*, Smith, and the classic predator, "Lava". Carloway's own class acts: Crossley, Anderson, "Sqweg", and Mackay, became markers, not creators, and forward balls speculative, not killer. Buchanan and "Dokus" had too much unsupported running to do. After 29 minutes another "Nomie" corner on the right was met at the near post by "Lava", 12 metres out, but his glancing header spun away high to the left. Campbell caught it on the far byeline, 12 metres out, then lifted a reverse up-and-under high over his head to drop down inside the Blues' left-hand post, where the arriving Mackenzie used his power to outjump Buchanan and nod home, practically under the bar (1-1).

Next, Anderson fought to turn in the centre and send an exquisite golden ball diagonally right to a breaking "Barra". He carried the ball to the right edge of the box and sent a daisycutter whistling across Houston's goal but a metre past the far post. Nevertheless, a definite momentum now favoured the home side. On 34 minutes a beautiful cross from the left touch-line, midway within the Carloway half, found Macmillan beating the Blues' back-line in the centre to nod the ball from 12 metres to Beaton's left, but the header lacked pace and Beaton was untroubled. A minute later, however, another Lochs surge on the left, saw Campbell's(?) flighted pass from 20 metres glanced home by champion poacher, "Lava", to Beaton's right from 12 metres (2-1).

Unexpectedly, na Gormaich had an immediate chance to equalize, when "Sqweg" pinpointed "Barra" on the right. His squared lay-off set up "Dokus" on the edge of the box but his lob-shot cleared the bar by a metre. The half concluded with a "Nomie" free-kick 18 metres out on the right, 6 metres from the touch-line, being headed back across goal by "Lava", 12 metres out by the far post. Smith hammered the loose ball against Maciver, before the stopper recovered to clear it as far as Creed Park.

Half-time: Lochs 2 Carloway 1

It was difficult to imagine what words of advice the management might offer the players in the dressing-room. Lochs were undoubtedly on song: eager for the ball; coordinated; moving well; supporting each other; creative - in short, all the positives, with no obvious weaknesses. A threadbare squad afforded no radical options, only tweaks. The back-line was still performing admirably, with "D.I." and "Tiger" dogged on "Lava" and Smith, but despite their best efforts, those in front were increasingly operating as units.

Also, the absence of Johnson and Macdonald was allowing the Mackenzies on either side to push forward increasingly to broaden an already elusive, creative mid-line. Immediately, however, a strong Anderson run took him to the left edge of the Lochs' box, where he squared right to Buchanan, but his quick-fire left-footer went straight to the keeper. A minute later a Moody free-kick, 22 metres from goal, to the left, was neatly curled a foot over Beaton's right-hand bar.

The free-kicks proliferated as the Blues struggled to gain a grip in midfield, though a cast-iron "D.I./Maciver/"Tiger" defence still denied the Maroons the clincher. On 56 minutes it was Smith's turn to try his luck from 20 metres but his free-kick also just cleared the bar. Two minutes later a Lochs push caused Maciver to mishit a clearance to his left, but Smith, in turn, failed to get hold of the ball, and his effort from 16 metres spun harmlessly past. Yet another free-kick, this time from Mackenzie 24 metres out on the right, had to be pushed over the bar by Beaton, under pressure by his right-hand post.

The departure of Macmillan and "Nomie" in the next ten minutes significantly helped Carloway's cause. On 66 minutes a dazzling Crossley run from the centre-line took him left for 20 metres, before he cut in towards the box, trailing defenders like Halley's Comet, but his shot from 24 metres flew at speed over Houston's left-hand bar. Two minutes later a Mackenzie free-kick from 24 metres out on the right, was headed out by Maciver, spun loose in the box, then was struck against MacIennan by "Lava", before ricocheting wildly over the bar. The corner was headed clear, to be met by Moody 22 metres out, but his effort was blocked for yet another corner.

The final fifteen minutes saw a resurgent Carloway re-assert themselves in midfield and drive forward in a desperate search for the equalizer. The action became frenetic, with defensive play by both sides resembling unarmed combat. An imaginative Anderson diagonal freed "Barra" on the right but his deep cross 6 metres from the bye-line was cut out by Houston at full stretch. On 76 minutes a "Sqweg" free-kick from the halfway line caused confusion in the Lochs' box, before Anderson was penalised for sharing his boot with a Lochie's leg. A minute later a Murray ball forward, midway within the Carloway half, found "Lava" running free on the left, but his shot was parried brilliantly by Beaton low to his right, round his right-hand post.

As na Gormaich pushed, another Lochs break saw Campbell send Smith down the left and his parting low drive whipped a metre past Beaton's left-hand post. The Blues' final roll of the dice came in the 89th minute when a perfect "Sqweg" cross from the left touch-line, midway within the Maroons' half, allowed Crossley to storm in to meet the ball within the 6-metre box, but under pressure from Houston, he could not angle his header accurately and his attempt went straight up and over the bar. Deep in added-on time, as the referee checked his watch, Lochs administered the *coup de grâce*: a last-ditch Carloway attack broke down on the penalty spot and the ball rapidly played out to "Nipper", moving out on the left towards midfield. He looked up and lifted an inward diagonal just over the last man's head, just inside the Carloway half, in the centre circle, for "Lava" to shoot on to instantly. He carried the gift, unhindered, to the edge of the box, stayed calm, then lifted a neat lob over the stranded keeper, to bounce in under the

bar (3-1).

Full-time: Lochs 3 Carloway 1

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since Carloway's stunning 5-1 League victory here 13 months ago, which set them on the way to their first Championship. The departures of Seumas and Fraser Macleod, Scott Macaulay, and "Gochan" have been unhelpful in the extreme, though new arrivals, like the explosive Buchanan, a revelation this season so far, and ace wing/halves, like Leigh Johnson and Archie Macdonald, are creditable additions to any squad.

Rapid transition in personnel is endemic to island football squads, e.g. think of Back's present struggles to regenerate. Continuous success must always reside with clubs that can retain their squad from year to year, as Lochs contrived to do in the 2000s. Tonight, unfortunately, Carloway were only a shadow of the side who performed so creditably that night last May and, on Saturday, against Athletic, even, indeed, against Benbecula the week before. Granted, there was no shame in losing to a quality side like Lochs tonight. It's how you lose that is the question.

Many excuses can be put forward: the absence of key players; quality opposition; ongoing niggling injury affecting star performers; and so on, but every side in the Western Isles faces such trials. However, those on show tonight have shown that they can bounce back. After successive defeats to Point and West Side earlier in May, pessimism was in danger of spreading at Cnoc a' Choilich. Yet days later, na Gormaich travelled to Goathill and turned Athletic over 5-1, before beginning an unbeaten run which took them right through to tonight's game. So one sub-standard hour at Creagan Dubh doesn't constitute a crisis, especially when you consider that the players on the field did not weaken for 90 minutes in their attempts to come to grips with first-class opposition: Maclennan/Maciver/Macarthur were like gneiss throughout; Buchanan tireless and always seeking the main chance; "Sqweg" and "Dokus" dogged; and Billy Anderson and Dan Crossley (despite a clattering first-half challenge troubling him for a period) endlessly seeking the killer ball.

Lochs Man of the Match: Johnny Smith.

Carloway Man of the Match: Gus Maciver.