

Highland Amateur Cup Semi-Final:

Carloway 2 (1) lochdar Saints 0 (0)

Fraser Macleod 2 (pen)

Jack Buchanan 55

At Goathill Park, Stornoway.

Saturday, 1.30 p.m., 12.7.14

Ref.: Calum "Chancy" Macleod.

Standside line judge: Kenneth Macaulay

Farside line judge: Donald "Donyards" Macdonald.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

David Beaton

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Gus Maciver Donald "D.I." MacIennan

Archie Macdonald Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Dan Crossley Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod Phil Macleod

Fraser Macleod ☒ Jack Buchanan

Subs.: Gordon "Tago" Macdonald (Phil Macleod) 68; Kevin "Gochan" Macleod (Archie Macdonald) 79;
Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (Jack Buchanan) 90+1.

Subs. not used: Gordon Craigie; Billy Anderson.

Red card: Fraser Macleod 72

Manager: Stephen Macaulay.

John Macdonald Carl Macphee

Colin Scott Aonghas Campbell (capt) Ally Downie Scott Matheson

Taylor Linich Calum Campbell Harry Luney A Macgillivray

Stephen Scott ☒

Yellow card: Stephen Scott 2

The most poignant of events this, where you hope both teams could reach the Final - indeed, you wish this **were** the Final and then there would definitely be a winner from the islands - but still hope that your own team would triumph. After all, there can be only one winner; otherwise the competition is pointless. Such games are the sort of occasion in which every player dreams of participating; anyone in awe of such an event or doubtful that they can perform on a day like this is in the wrong line of business and should take up gardening - or reading. Yet victory over friends and acquaintances can be the sweetest of emotions; defeat, to them, the bitterest.

Today was the third meeting of the current Lewis and Harris and Uist and Barra League Champions, both previous ties being won by the Uist side at Lionacleit. Two years ago, in late May, the sides had shared a 10-goal thriller in Round 2 of this Cup, before Saints progressed 5-4 on penalties, only to suffer the same agonising fate in a Round 3 shoot-out with Sleat and Strath in Uig. The hat-trick star for the Saints that day against Carloway? One Archie Macdonald, appearing at right half/wing for the Blues today! The year before, it had been Coop Cup QF misery for na Gormaich, as two Saints' goals in the first **THREE** minutes had led to a rapid 1-2 exit stage left for the Blues.

The warnings were there for Carloway today: lochdar Saints have dominated the Southern Isles in the last few years the way Lochs controlled Lewis and Harris from 2003-10 and had already disposed of Point, the current L. & H.L. leaders (Westside), and Back, *en route* to Goathill, and had only lost once this season, to Athletic in the Coop Cup.

Carloway's HAC progress had also been eventful: in mid-May, they had had to recover from a forgettable Round 1 first-half at Lioncleit (1-2) versus Barra with three second-half strikes from Archie Macdonald and Fraser Macleod, before prevailing 2-0 over Athletic, at Goathill, thanks to a controversial penalty, followed by a class finish from Jack Buchanan. Round 3 was the Lochinver/Culbokie fiasco, and next, a Quarter-Final against the reigning Caithness League

Champions and HAC holders, Wick Groats, in Ullapool. In a nervy, fluctuating encounter, Carloway controlled the first 25 minutes; Wick Groats the next 20; and the second half was an evenly matched contest, made memorable by a stunning goalkeeping display from David Beaton; unremitting excellence from Gus Maciver in central defence; and iron-willed leadership from his captain in front of him, Domhnall Mackay.

Carloway's only selection problem today was the absence of Leigh Johnson (at his sister's wedding), so Archie Macdonald switched across field to the right, and Phil Macleod came in on the left. Fraser Macleod arrived from Glasgow to reprise his strike partnership with 18-year-old goal-getter, Jack Buchanan. The Blues were gratified, no doubt, to note the absence of midfielder pain-in-the-neck, John Angus "Wee Man" Macphee, with ligament damage, but all the other usual suspects - Harry Luney, Ally Downie, Aonghas Campbell (who orchestrated na Gormaich's exit two years ago), etc., were present, unfortunately.

An explosive opening was once a routine feature of most Carloway games - remember Dan Crossley's goal in 26 seconds at Barvas? Or the four goals in the first 18 minutes of the Westside game at Cnoc a' Choilich in 2011? The Blues delighted their fans by providing another this afternoon. As the heavens lowered and rain seemed imminent, an early long ball downfield by "D.I." cleared an advanced back-line towards the Carloway right. Jack Buchanan gave chase, left his marker a metre behind him, and was just touching the ball past the charging keeper inside the right corner of the box, when Stephen Scott clattered into him; the ball ricocheted off Buchanan and continued, and the hit man went down. Deliberate foul or not, the challenge denied the striker a goal chance. Fraser Macleod hit the penalty hard and though Scott anticipated well to get a hand to it, low to his left, its power carried it on and upwards into the net (1-0).

The shock opening did not appear to unsettle a resilient Saints whose midfield immediately began to exploit width on the wings. After 5 minutes Beaton had to react to a nasty in-swinging corner from his right to punch the ball onwards, amidst a crush of bodies almost under his bar. Carloway replied immediately with a carbon-copy Phil Macleod corner curling in from Scott's left, then brushing off heads by the near post, before Macdonald, 16 metres out in the centre, swung a right-footer a metre over the bar. However, both back-lines' attempts to support their respective midfields high was allowing opportunities for fast breaking - from Buchanan/Macleod and Macphee/Macdonald.

In 12 minutes another hairy moment arrived for the Blues when a Harry Luney free-kick from the central half-way line dropped plumb into the Blues' 6-metre box and Beaton had to really man-up to punch it clear within a mass of colliding bodies. The ball broke left and a long "D.I." diagonal found "Sgweg" breaking forward to release Phil Macleod down the left, but his drive from 20 metres was sliced well-wide of Scott's left-hand post.

The Blues were under especial pressure on their right and the elegant play-maker, Aonghas Campbell, soon established a grip with the incisive ball from midfield, as he had in the 2012 game. "*Win the ball/get it to him/and Aonghas won't waste it*", seemed a wise strategy. In 16 minutes he certainly didn't, finding Carl Macphee coming from the right, and Beaton reacted magnificently, to pull off a low right-handed block to his right from the shot from 16 metres.

Suddenly, in 19 minutes, na Gormaich had the chance to create clear daylight between the sides. In a move Müller, Kroos, and Khedira would have been proud of, "Sgweg" supplied Mackay to feed "Frazmac" through the centre, allowing him to move in behind Calum Campbell and Luney from the right but his instant flick from 14 metres was read brilliantly by Scott low to his left to pull off the save of the match by pushing it out for a corner. Despite this, Saints were now controlling the midfield, though back-lines remained firm. The Carloway midfield were now in EaF Leg 2 Col Uarach mode: contributing whole-heartedly, but as individuals. Cohesion was

being lost to Campbell and Downie, loading the gun barrel, but Macdonald and Macphee were still frustrated by a faultless Gus Maciver-inspired defence. Chances were disappearing; the frenetic - almost desperate - pace now slackened. It had to.

As Saints advanced, space appeared in their half for a team with pace for the sudden break - a feature of Carloway play this season. In 26 minutes Crossley received the ball in the centre, then flighted a glorious de Boer ball right for the racing Macdonald to meet it perfectly just inside the right corner of the box, but his volley from 18 metres crashed into the near-side net. Six minutes later it was Mackay's turn in the centre circle to send the golden diagonal to a breaking Phil Macleod on the left but Macgillivray reacted like lightning to block him in the left of the box for the corner. In 37 minutes Crossley burst through the centre to supply Buchanan running leftward across the line of the box from the right. The striker tried to find "Frazmac" moving in from the left but the ball rebounded to him, and in typical fashion, he steadied himself, turned right, then fired in the most careful of right-foot strikes - but it flew an inch over the bar.

A minute later a defining moment arrived in the SF. With Campbell once again feeding rightwards, the ball was relayed down the right, where Downie won a barging collision with Maciver to make the bye-line on the right, then send a vicious low, squared cross streaking across the box, 8 metres out, just out of reach of Beaton, but just too far behind the retreating defence. Macphee met it unmarked by the far post, but, somehow, managed to flick it a metre outside Beaton's right-hand post.

Half-time: Carloway 1 lochdar Saints 0

The close intensity of proceedings had limited chances and Carloway needed to gel more coherently in midfield to resist Saints' smoother movement forward. In 48 minutes they did just that, "D .I." supplying Mackay to burst forward down the right, wall-pass to Macdonald, before finding "Sgweg" in the centre, who immediately flicked right to Buchanan. The Blues' ace made the edge of the penalty box but his hooked right-foot cross was just inches too high for "Frazmac" by the far post and his header flew upwards and over.

Seven minutes later na Gormaich had one foot in the Final. Maciver broke up an attack on the edge of his box, then supplied Macleod in the centre circle. He resisted a challenge to move diagonally right and then hooked a high right-footer forward for Buchanan to race between Macgillivray and Luney through the centre, then just beat the approaching Scott to clip a lob high into the net from the edge of the box (2-0).

The pattern of the game changed predictably: Carloway sank back, inviting Saints to commit men, then broke at speed on any ball won. On the hour a long ball from the right was blocked from reaching Linich on the left corner of the box by Macdonald, rebounded inwards, and Campbell came in to thunder a shot two metres over the bar from 22 metres.

Six minutes later the cruellest of luck descended on the Uibhistich. A free-kick hit high from the centre-line on the right touch-line was nodded back, 8 metres from Beaton's left-hand post, by Campbell, broke off a Carloway back inwards, and Luney met it cleanly directly in front of goal, 12 metres out, to whack a right-foot shot past Beaton's despairing left hand - but the celebrations were cut short instantly by the sight of the far-side line judge's flag - for offside, apparently.

Moments later, another pivotal moment arrived, with far-reaching consequences for na Gormaich. A Carloway attack was broken down in the Uist box and the ball cleared downfield, where play continued, unaware, at first, of a great stushie developing on the edge of the Saints' box, courtesy of an alleged late follow-through on Buchanan. The obligatory

pushing/shoving/attempts to pull others away, etc. began, the referee eventually noticing when the nonsense appeared to be fizzling out as "Frazmac" pushed Stephen Scott to the ground and walked away. Rule 1 on a football field: never raise your hands to an opponent (unless you're called Sergio Agüero, of course). Rule 2: make sure the referee isn't looking if you do.

With their iconic co-hitman's departure, the Blues now clearly wished to run down the clock and the last twenty minutes became a war of attrition: for Carloway, the motto was: "*have; hold; break*"; for Saints, "*find the key, quickly, to unlock this rock-solid defence*". However, try as they might, clear sights of goal just could not be created - at either end, and a bruising contest continued between the 18-metre lines, with only two further half-chances.

In 74 minutes Crossley won the ball to the left of the centre-line and set up "Tago" on the left. The wing-man slipped outside Matheson before sending in a high square cross 16 metres from the bye-line. Macdonald, rushing towards it from the right, met it flush on the bounce with his right foot but it went straight to Scott. Two minutes later a Saints' corner on the right was headed on outside the near post for Luney to meet it with a header in front of goal, 12 metres out, but his looping attempt was tipped over the bar by Beaton.

Full-time: Carloway 2 lochdar Saints 0

Not a breath of wind separated two sides who delivered a spectacle as intense and absorbing as any witnessed at Goathill. No daylight between them - only two goals, and they are the only things that count in football. Not possession, or territory, or chances created. Some fans argue that last Season's side was the greatest Carloway side ever and the departure of Seumas Macleod, Scott Macaulay, and Calum Tom Moody has seriously weakened the club. On the evidence of today's performance, with faultless contributions from Maciver, "D.I.", Mackay, and Buchanan, and unbroken support from all others, that position is hard to defend, as the Blues ground out the closest of victories over the finest side the Uists have ever produced.

A second-minute penalty should have coloured the game, one would have expected, but lochdar seemed unfazed by such an early blow - indeed, it seemed to fire them up - and they went on to have the better of the first half, with Aonghas Campbell and Ally Downie pulling the strings. However, the Maciver/"D.I."/"Tiger" iron curtain remained intact, despite a first half series of dangerous corners, and a few threatening melées in the box in the second. Strike-power up-front was lacking for Saints, as was a co-ordinated Blues' midfield in the first half. Nevertheless, the Carloway middle-men still performed creditably as individuals in the first half and came good as a unit in the second, whereas Macphee's 39th minute opportunity proved Saints' best clear-cut chance throughout. Either side would have been worthy representatives of the Western Isles in the HAC Final. Hopefully, the one who made it will be successful.

Carloway Man of the Match: Gus Maciver.

lochdar Saints Man of the Match: Aonghas Campbell.