

Coop Cup Cup Semi-final:

Carloway 0 (0) Athletic 0 (0) (Carloway won 3-0 on penalties)

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway

Saturday, 19.7.14.

Referee: D.I.Maclean (Bragar)

Standside line judge: Neil Macritchie.

Farside line judge: David "Spider" Macleod.

MANAGER: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

David Beaton

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

Lee Johnson Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Dan Crossley Murdo "Squegg" Macleod Archie "Staato" Macdonald

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Jack Buchanan

Subs.: Gordon "Tago" Macdonald (Archie Macdonald) 17; Kevin "Gochan" Macleod (Murdo "Squegg" Macleod) 45.

Subs. not used: Gordon Craigie; Phil Macleod; Ross Maciver.

Yellow card: Gordon Gordon "Tago" Macdonald 89.

Red card: Kevin "Gochan" Macleod 59.

MANAGER: Magnus Johnson

Scott Maciver Keith Bray

Paul Afrin Nic "Nuck" Davis Danny Macleod Robert Jones Gary Macleod

Elliott Rudall Ali "Koch" Morrison Robert Shirkie

Colin Macritchie

Sub.: Sven Wilshire (Scott Maciver) 7; Scott Morgan (Paul Afrin) 82; Connor "Fringe" Maciver (Sven Wilshire) 87.

Yellow card: Ali "Koch" Morrison 70.

Ness's visit to Cnoc a' Choilich last Monday may have been those clubs' first meeting of the Season but today's with Athletic was already the clubs' fourth pairing, the others all having taken place at Goathill. There was a time when a confrontation with the Stornoway men induced anxiety in the Blues and any meeting with Scott Maciver was, hopefully, avoided, but in the last few years, as Carloway have gradually

established themselves as a force on the island, the Scott Maciver-led thrashings have ceased and honours have been even, culminating in last Season's tense and exciting League double over their rivals, 2-0 at home, 3-0 away, which were decisive steps towards na Gormaich's first-ever League title.

This Season has already witnessed two Cup wins and an away League victory for the Blues in the "*Big Smoke*", at a ground which once was Carloway's own very special "*Field of Nightmares*". In the first, an ABC SF in late April, a second half "Nuck" penalty had cancelled out a Lee Johnson opener, extra-time was goal-less, and this, of course, led to a dreaded shoot-out, which Carloway edged 4-2. The League re-match a fortnight later was a much more straightforward affair, courtesy of a Jack Buchanan master-class in finishing. Next on the agenda was the HAC Round 2 in May, the tightest of duels, in which Carloway prevailed 2-0, settled by two early second-half goals: a controversial penalty, followed by yet another exquisite strike from Jack Buchanan.

Athletic had begun this Season in rampant scoring form, mauling United, Lochs, Back, and Harris in turn before the sides' ABC affair had deflated them somewhat. After that, their League season had become wayward, and only a JS Final appearance remained on the table, going into this penultimate local Cup tournament.

Carloway, also, despite having a reasonably successful League Season, with a first-ever HAC Cup Final appearance to look forward to in a fortnight, had still only an ABC Cup Final reverse to show for 2013, so victory today could be seen to be imperative. Unfortunately playmaker, Billy Anderson, and young star, Josh Harris, were unfit, Kevin "Barra" Macneil was unavailable, and Fraser Macleod was unable to appear as expected, due to work commitments. The good news was that the inspirational Kevin "Gochan" Macleod was present on the bench, beside Gordon Craigie, Gordon "Tago" Macdonald, Phil Macleod (unlucky to only make substitute, considering his superlative display at stopper on Monday), and Ross Maciver, who notched his first goal for the club in Monday's EaF tie, courtesy of "Sweeney".

There were notable absences from the Aths' line-up too: no Clintons; Stuart "Bubble" Macdonald (on holiday); Ross Macrae, or Scott "Flapjack" Macaulay, but, unfortunately, leading adversaries like Lewis and Harris Young Player of the Year 2013, Robert Jones, Scott Maciver, and Nick "Nuck" Davis were on the field for kick-off.

A disappointing crowd was present at Cnoc a' Choilich on what was the hottest day of the year so far on west Lewis, although more and more drifted in as the match progressed. The opening swiftly assumed a disturbing familiarity, with the midfield struggling in the opening half-hour to achieve a cohesive rhythm. Fortunately, the axis of the team remained constant - David Beaton sound as the Liberty Bell at the back; Gus Maciver the Rock of Gibraltar before him, flanked by his able lieutenants "Tiger: and "D.I."; the fulcrum of the operation next, Domhnall Mackay; then Jack

Buchanan like quicksilver up front. However, as in the last few games, the early initiative was with the opposition. In 4 minutes Paul Afrin made 16 metres from the right bye-line but his pacy square cross was just a shade too high for the arriving Maciver by the far post and flew up and over. A minute later Maciver got past "D.I." to the right bye-line and his dangerous cut-back whizzed low across goal without any takers. In 7 minutes a through ball sent Maciver into the left of the box but as he fought to control the ball, 12 metres from goal, his namesake slid in, Maciver went down, the ball seemed to become entangled between his legs, and Bray and "Tiger" joined in the developing melée to extricate it. At the time, it seemed an innocuous free-kick to Carloway; little did we know, Scott had broken his ankle.

Three minutes later, Robert Jones won the ball on the right centre-line, turned inwards to his left, then released a glorious defence-splitter to "D.I.'s" left, behind Macdonald, for Danny Macleod to run clear into the box, but again a brilliant reaction tackle from Maciver, 8 metres from goal, negated the danger.

It was 26 minutes before the Blues actually disturbed "Titch", sunbathing in the Athletic goal, when Mackay supplied "Squegg" just inside the Aths' half. He performed a characteristic check, turn, and flick to Crossley moving forward, but his low strike from 24 metres was deadened by the turf and constituted no threat. Five minutes later a disputed free-kick on the Aths' right, midway within the Blues' half was flighted in beautifully by Macleod, currently the best dead-ball kicker on the island. Bray, towards the near post, flicked it on across goal and Mackay was forced to swipe it away smartly for a corner on the left. Rudall won the jump to meet the resultant corner but his powerful back-header soared high and wide of Beaton's right hand junction of bar and post.

Four minutes later a Davis feed allowed Bray a fleeting opportunity at goal from 16 metres but Maciver blocked well and the massively rebounding ball was played back and wide to Gary Macleod on the right centre-line. He immediately played long forward to Jones breaking clear down the right to the bye-line and his expert cross beat everyone to reach Bray in front of goal unmarked, 12 metres out. However, his desire to control and shift it to his left allowed "Tiger" those added seconds to make a first-rate block and clearance. Immediately, Jones was clear on the right again, but his carbon-copy cross was easily headed on by "Tiger" and clear this time.

In 42 minutes a lightning break on the right, and imaginative play by "Dokus", Johnson and Buchanan almost gave na Gormaich a half-time lead they hardly deserved. "Dokus" won the ball on the centre-line, before moving right and lifting the ball forward over Afrin for Johnson to break down the right. 16 metres from the bye-line, he crossed square before Rudall could close him down, and Buchanan came flying in low behind Shirkie to meet the ball with a header, two feet from the ground, but the ball flew high to Macritchie's left.

Half-time: Carloway 0 Athletic 0

Despite Athletic edging possession and territory, it had been a first half of few “*should-have-scored*” chances, if any. The work ethic had been high in midfield, notably from Danny Macleod, Domhnall Mackay, and “Sguegg”, but Carloway had missed the imagination of Anderson, and the two most gifted players on the field, Crossley and Jones, had largely cancelled each other out. “Dokus” and “Nuck” had not figured highly, either. For long periods, Jack Buchanan had been like Ben Gunn on Treasure Island, and both back-lines - “Tiger”/Gus/”D.I.” and Shirkie/”Koch”/Rudall had been untroubled; Beaton and Macritchie could have had a game of chess together.

Maciver’s early withdrawal had dulled Athletic’s threat and nagging injury to “Squegg” persuaded “Windy” to up the stakes by introducing the pace and aggression of “Gochan”. Certainly the balance of play shifted towards Macritchie in the initial stages of the second half. An early series of corners led to a “Tago” free-kick, 20 metres from the bye-line on the right, being curled in beautifully behind the defence but Macritchie smothered it unhindered by the far post.

On 57 minutes a “Dokus”/Johnson link-up on the right centre-line saw the latter’s high ball forward send “Gochan” sprinting down the line to the bye-line. He controlled the ball, turned back, then delivered a perfect, inviting cross square into the box, unfortunately just too high for Buchanan in the centre, whose head touched it on backwards beyond Shirkie to “Tago”, lurking just outside the far post. Macritchie was out like a flash to block, as “Tago” steadied himself, but his left-footer was dragged low beyond the far post.

Two minutes later the odds on a Blues’ victory significantly lengthened when “Gochan’s” opinions earned him first go at the Dove shampoo. However, in the final half-hour, it was na Gormaich that stepped up a gear, with Crossley and Mackay pushing forward repeatedly through the centre, and Athletic seemingly content to retreat more and more into defence, and wait for the break.

In 61 minutes a “Tago” corner on the Aths’ left was nodded out and “D.I.” and Macritchie clashed as the defender hooked the awkward ball high over the bar from 10 metres. Two minutes later, a trademark dribbling run by Crossley down the right took him to within 10 metres of the bye-line before his whipped cross was met by “Tago”, unmarked to the left of goal but, again, the winger, normally deadly from such a position, sent it wide to the left of the Aths’ goal.

A counter-attack in 74 minutes led to a Gary Macleod free-kick directly in front of goal, 20 metres out. He struck it well, low round the left of the wall but Beaton read it comfortably. In 80 minutes a Macleod cross from the bye-line, midway within the Carloway half, was lifted high to the far post, but “Nuck’s” header from 12 metres lacked power and the keeper gathered easily.

In 82 minutes a bursting Johnson run down the right ended with a low cross from the bye-line arriving in the centre, just behind Buchanan, but in characteristic fashion,

the striker turned back, gathered, then whipped round to send his effort low to “Titch’s” right from the edge of the box, but the goalie reacted brilliantly to push the shot round his right-hand post at full stretch. From the following Crossley corner, the ball flew right throughout to “D .I.” to the right of goal, 12 metres out, but he was unable to control it and his bundled left-foot attempt hit the Athletic left-hand post and was cleared.

Beaton had to perform equally instinctively on the stroke of the whistle when a last Athletic attack led once more to a deep Macleod free-kick from midway within the Blues’ half on the right being knocked back out to him, to chip in again. Maciver gathered it first, on the edge of the box, then dispatched a left-foot hook screaming high to Beaton’s left, but the keeper reacted magnificently to catch, and hold, the flying ball to his left.

Full-time: Carloway 0 Athletic 0

And so, for a second time this Season, the two sides faced each other in the universally hated modern way to settle Cup-ties, and for the fourth time in a row, David Beaton metamorphosed into Jens Lehmann to choose correctly which side to go for each time, and actually stop two of the three efforts. It was left to Dan Crossley to seal victory in true Antonín Panenka-style* by converting a clever third Blues’ penalty, which fooled the keeper.

PENALTIES:

ATHLETIC

CARLOWAY.

Gary Macleod. David Beaton saves. X 0-0 **Domhnall Mackay scores ✓ 0-1**

Robert Shirkie hits post. X 0-1 **Kenny “Dokus” Macdonald scores ✓ 0-2**

Nic “Nuck” Davis. David Beaton saves. X 0-2 **Dan Crossley scores ✓ 0-3**

“Justice has been done”, “Scone” declaimed around Cnoc a’ Choilich to the departing crowd. Whether or not Magnus Johnson agreed with him is debatable. They didn’t bump into each other. Whatever, na Gormaich’s run of good form continued against Athletic, despite an ineffective first half.

“A game of two halves”, is perhaps a truer cliché than one might think, and if it is, it is essential to have something to show for the half you’ve controlled. Athletic clearly

had the better of the first half, but rarely threatened, although the injury to Scott Maciver contributed to this lack of fire-power, even in the second half when Carloway were reduced to 10 men for the final half-hour. Indeed, once more, the Blues seemed to recover from a shapeless opening 45, cohere immediately from the second-half, and grow in strength throughout the second despite the “Gochan” setback. “Windy” should market his interval team talks. Louis Van Gaal or Brendan Rodgers would love to read them. The Gus Maciver-led defence, as always, had been rock-hard throughout, but the midfield link linking them to Buchanan only seemed to ignite consistently in the second when Mackay was strengthened by Johnson stretching the back-line wide and Crossley coming to life though the new-found space in the centre. Overall, however, the two sides were exceedingly well-matched, and with both missing an ace striker, the final half-hour turned out to be the most fiercely contested part of the whole tie.

Carloway Man of the Match: David Beaton.

Athletic Man of the Match: Robert Jones.

* *Thanks to Duncan Macarthur.*