

Highland Amateur Cup Final:

Carloway F.C. 1 (1) Avoch A.F.C. 2 (0)

Fraser Macleod 12

Kyle Maclean 70

Gary Urquhart 76

At Tulloch Caledonian Stadium, Inverness.

Saturday, 2nd August, 2014. 12.30 p.m.

Referee: Jim Lyon

First line judge: Chris Macleod

Second line judge: Gordon Seago

CARLOWAY F.C.

MANAGER: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Asst. Managers: Domhnall Mackay; Kenneth "Noley" MacIennan.

David Beaton

Donald "D.I." MacIennan Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur
Lee Johnson Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Dan "Raymondo" Crossley Murdo "Squegg"
Macleod Archie "Statto" Macdonald

Jack Buchanan Fraser "Frazmac" MacLeod

Subs.: Scott Macaulay (Dan Crossley) 46; Kevin "Gochan" Macleod (Lee Johnson) 59;
Gordon "Tago" Macdonald (Murdo "Squegg" Macleod) 81; Billy Anderson (Kenny "Dokus"
Macdonald) 85; Gordon Craigie (David Beaton) 88.

AVOCH A.F.C.

MANAGER: George Patience.

Asst. Manager: Michael Hind.

Shaun Kerr Ronnie Jones

Paul Gair Graeme MacGruer Jamie MacKay Dave Manson Kyle MacLean

Iain Wilson Mark Gair Martin MacAllister (capt.)

Alistair Macleod

Subs.: Gordon Duff; Aidan Hersee; Gary Urquhart; Ross Munro; Craig Campbell

Yellow cards: Craig Campbell 68; Paul Gair 80; Jamie Mackay 83; Ronnie Jones 90+1

In the winter of 2007-8, only a deluded fantasist might have believed that by August, 2014, Carloway F.C.'s bucket list would have shrunk to only two unticked boxes: the Eilean an Fhraoich and Highland Amateur Cups. Both are

special cases in their own way: the first, because of its unique selection format; the second, because class mainland opposition must be overcome to win it. Now, in the space of a week, the Blues had the chance, once more, to close the book on that list.

A second EaF Final beckoned next Friday at Col Uarach, against 2012 conquerors, Westside, but today featured the jewel in the crown, a first-ever HAC Final, and a third opportunity to overcome ten-time finalists and four-times winners, Avoch, and join Ness, Point, Lochs, and Back, in the Cup Roll of Honour. This was only na Gormaich's fourth appearance in the open rounds of the HAC, the break-through year being 2008 when the Blues crushed Halkirk, 5-1 at Culbokie, before losing 3-4 after extra-time to Castletown in Fortrose. Two years later they lost at Culbokie again, 3-5 to Golspie Stafford, but the following year, 2011, a sparkling campaign took them past Lochs (2-1), Athletic (4-3), Castletown (4-0), Kirkwall Rovers (5-1), to an initial Semi-Final, but the reigning cup-holders, Avoch, proved a level beyond na Gormaich and prevailed 3-1.

Last season, Fate threw the two sides together again, at Culbokie in R 3, but an 89th minute header once more denied the Blues. So, was this to be **the** year? The present campaign had had an unpromising start, with the Blues desperately clawing themselves back into the competition to overcome Barra 4-2. However, they then roared into life, 2-0 versus Athletic, before benefitting from an unexpected walk-over over Culbokie. Hard-fought victories over Wick Groats (the holders) 3-2, and lochdar Saints 2-0, soon inspired hope in the faithful that the final rung could be climbed. But Fate is the cruellest of mistresses.

This season, Carloway have operated round a vibrant, cast-iron spine: David Beaton - "Gus" Maciver - Domhnall Mackay/Dan Crossley - Jack Buchanan. At around 20.15, ten days ago, a silver dagger was driven through the heart of the side at Fivepenny in Ness, when their inspirational caulking mallet, "Gus" Maciver, was hospitalized - 23 seconds from the final whistle!!! Of course, Captain Marvel, Domhnall Mackay, assumed this r ole, but this meant a crucial bulwark disappeared from the centre that allowed the creativity of Crossley, "Dokus", and "Squegg" to flourish. They now had to fight for the ball **AND** supply it, thus diminishing the frequency of ammunition for the strikers; Johnson and MacDonald were expected to cover this deficiency.

Not the approach of choice against seasoned performers like Avoch, who begin each Season with HAC Final already printed in their calendar. Experience can be an extra man on such occasions, and the Gairs, Shaun Kerr, Ronnie Jones, etc. shared a wealth of this in their quest to regain a Cup lent briefly to Wick Groats last year.

The sky was grey and lowering and rain did not seem far to the south as the Blues created history in a stadium that could easily have doubled for Ice Station Zebra. However, there was no time to bask in the glory of the setting. Immediately they were under pressure deep on their left, with Shaun Kerr freeing Kyle Maclean to the bye-line, and his low, squared cross spun loose off Mackay and "D.I.", 10 metres out, but Kerr and Jones, by the back post, misunderstood each other and the ball was whipped away.

A minute later, a "D.I." crunch on Jones led to a Mackay free-kick, midway within the Carloway half on their right, being headed away by "Dokus" for a corner. From the clearance, the break was on and "Dokus" found Macleod on the right centre-line. A snap Wilson tackle saw the ball ricochet off both players and behind the back for "Frazmac" to break clear, down the right. Sixteen metres from the bye-line, he crossed low and hard. However, Buchanan's connect was blocked clear for Johnson to meet 16 metres out, but his mishit drive spun harmlessly away.

A sudden Avoch break through the left left Shaun Kerr with his first clear sight of goal, 12 metres out by Beaton's right-hand post, but Mackay reacted expertly with the saving tackle. A moment later came the first realistic scoring opportunity, as a "Dokus" flick to his right was read, 10 metres within his own half, by Jones, who sprinted forward to the edge of the box, then flighted the ball neatly to Kerr, moving off "D.I." to Beaton's right. He reverse-headed the ball square to MacKay across goal, but he headed a metre over the bar.

Such a golden chance missed was immediately punished, when Crossley freed "Frazmac" wide on the right, just inside the Avoch half. Again Wilson was on him, aided by Gair, but the striker, blessed by a fortunate rebound, wriggled clear and sped goal-wards, cutting into the right edge of the box. Ten metres from the goal-line his sharp, low cross/shot was blocked by the near post by Mark Gair for the corner. The textbook corner from Johnson that followed was then met head-high by Macleod as it dipped towards the near post and his bullet-header shot high into Alistair Macleod's top left junction of bar and post (**0-1**).

An unfazed Avoch did not wobble, and immediately MacLean was once more sent clear by MacAllister into the unmarked space behind Macdonald, wide of the line. He made the edge of the box, 16 metres from the bye-line, but his head-high cross found no takers.

With the pattern of play now determined, two perfectly-matched midfields and heavy marking defences were severely minimizing goal chances, but the danger on the Blues' left was still unsettled, and an unmarked MacLean was

once more sent racing through towards goal. He cut into the centre but as he entered the box, a brilliant recovery tackle by Mackay denied him his chance. In 20 minutes another moment of danger from Shaun Kerr, 12 metres out from Carloway's right-hand post, was snuffed out by Mackay and Beaton.

27 minutes had elapsed, before the Blues threatened Macleod again when a "Dokus" free-kick, 22 metres from goal was slipped to Crossley, moving down the right. He eluded Wilson to his right, and 6 metres from the bye-line, just inside the box, fired a low ball screaming into the 6-metre box, but Gair reacted first to block out for the corner.

Na Gormaich, spurred by Crossley's focussed breaks and delivery, now assumed a brief spell of midfield control. In 33 minutes Crossley robbed MacGruer in the centre-circle and his quick-fire supply straight forward to Buchanan was just read by Mark Gair, to get the foot in on the edge of the box. Two minutes later Macleod was sent behind Paul Gair, wide of Wilson, to race to the edge of the Avoch box, but his cross was blocked for a corner by the arriving Mark Gair. In 37 minutes another "Frazmac" break behind the midfield saw him supply Buchanan, moving in from the left, 20 metres out. MacAllister and Gair forced him across the line and his attempt from 20 metres was held comfortably by Macleod.

Serious injury to Crossley allowed Avoch to pressure ten-man Blues in the closing minutes. A break on the left saw MacKay's first touch shoot past the near post from 12 metres. In added-on time, a saving "Tiger" tackle on the penalty spot led to a short corner on Beaton's right being swung across the Carloway goal, touched on by "D.I.'s" head, then met by Kerr by the far post, but the whizzing ball was slightly out of reach as it came unexpectedly to him, and he could only touch it past.

Half-time: Carloway 1 Avoch 0

A satisfied Carloway support probably didn't register that a pronounced sea-shift in fortunes must now unfold as class *animateur*, Dan Crossley, departed the scene, one minute into the second half. It was the signal for James MacKay to press unhindered into the *trequartista* zone, Gair/MacGruer to push "Dokus" wide, and Manson/MacLean to press "Squegg" back. With "D.I." tracking Kerr and "Tiger" on Jones, Mackay now had the monumental task of supporting both, going head-to-head with Jamie MacKay, and supplying Scott Macaulay, who arrived in the middle in full-on Vin Diesel-mode - twisting/turning/shielding/laying-off - but was instantly engulfed by a swarm of black and yellow whenever the ball came near him, to prevent his trademark de Boers to Buchanan and "Frazmac." The longer the half progressed, the heavier the traffic towards David Beaton became.

On 49 minutes a MacKay lay-off sent Kerr through on the left to the corner of the box. He stepped left past 1-2-3 tackles, before curling a low shot across goal which just travelled a foot beyond the far post. A minute later a cross from the right led to a "Tiger" back-header which almost deceived an advancing keeper, who just scrambled back in time to tip it over his own bar. In 53 minutes, more problems in the Blues' box ended with "Dokus" booting clear for a corner on Beaton's right. A perfect MacLean corner was then met, directly in front of goal, 14 metres out, by Paul Gair, but his header twanged off the underside of the bar, the goal-line, then was thwacked as far as Drumnadrochit.

It was 56 minutes before Carloway finally sustained a break, with Macaulay finding Buchanan running loose on the left. He checked, then moved along the line of the box before driving. The blocked ball spun to the right and was won by "Frazmac", who immediately supplied "Statto" behind and to his left, but his drive from 24 metres cleared the top left of the bar by at least a metre.

Frustration was making Avoch careless, but, still, the Blues could not break their vice-like grip on proceedings. On 61 minutes a disputed Mackay trip on Kerr directly in front of goal, on the edge of the box, led to a dangerous free-kick which was curled carefully round the far end of the wall by MacLean, but his low left-footer went a foot wide of the far post. Seven minutes later MacLean was caught late by "Gochan" coming into the Carloway half on the Avoch left. His following free-kick was floated in perfectly into the Blues' box, to be headed down and straight out by Mackay, where it was met first-time by Urquhart, 20 metres from goal, but his low left-footer smacked the base of Beaton's left-hand post and broke out wide.

As the clock ran down, and the tension wound up, a few moments of individual brilliance delivered the break-through for Avoch, Maclean receiving the ball wide on the Avoch left, on the touch-line, then cutting in square towards the near corner of the box. Before he could be challenged by a shielding line, he cracked a right-foot screamer high inside Beaton's right junction of bar and post (1-1).

Before Carloway could adjust to the new circumstances, the game was turned on its head by a second goal. On 76 minutes a MacKay corner from Beaton's right dipped towards the penalty spot, where a pressured Urquhart managed to half-turn towards it, and reverse-curl a low flick just inside Beaton's right-hand post (2-1).

The cliché, "*a whole new ball-game*", now became appropriate. Na Gormaich had looked anything but dangerous in the second-half, so Avoch, confident

enough to defend and break, sank back and invited Carloway forward, and the final few minutes became a showcase for time-wasting, petty fouling, angry exchanges, and frequent displays of the yellow card. In fact, just like the final ten minutes of any Cup Final, where one team chooses to defend a single-goal lead.

However, try as they might, and despite frequently playing the ball high into the Avoch box from countless free-kicks, na Gormaich simply could not get a single clear sight of MacLeod in the opposition goal, and almost lost a third when MacLean outpaced "Tiger" into the right of the Blues' box but curled his shot wide of the injured Beaton and beyond the far post.

Full-time: Carloway 1 Avoch 2

The saying goes, *"It's better to have lov'd and lost, than never to have lov'd at all"*. It's unrecorded whether or not anyone ever said, *"It's better to have reached an HAC Final and lost, than never -----"*. The larger the prize unwon, the more bitter it feels to have lost it, and the nagging doubt never really disappears that that might be the only chance – **YOUR** only chance - of winning it. Sport - and life - abounds with missed opportunities of this nature.

On reflection, a 90-minute learning curve proved too brief for a weakened Carloway against experienced street-wise opponents, whose cover, weight in the tackle, and spread was textbook. Some squad members - Mackay; "D.I."; Crossley; Johnson; MacDonald, for instance - acclimatized themselves instantly to the heightened ambience of constant movement, minimum time for reflection, rapid reaction and delivery, without frills, flicks, or extended touch. Despite the body blow of "Gus's" absence, the faultless leadership of Mackay, comprehensively covered by "D.I.", and the fearless enterprise of Dan Crossley, augmented wide by the pace of Lee Johnson, and hard graft of "Statto", propelled the Blues to a deserved 50-50 share of the first-half and a 1-0 lead.

However, in the final 45, Lady Fortune really frowned on na Gormaich. The loss of playmaker Dan Crossley immediately, then Lee Johnson on the hour, saw the midfield fragment alarmingly, though Scott Macaulay competed resolutely to re-ignite his connection with Jack Buchanan from last Wednesday; but he was isolated and, time after time, had to fight his way forward through 2-3 hard-tackling blockers. A marginalized "Gochan" struggled to establish himself while the combative presence and pace of the Avoch midfield forced "Dokus" wide and "Squegg" to retreat left and created sustained pressure on the back-line. With "Tiger" spending the game attached to Ronnie Jones's shorts, Archie MacDonald's aggressive input at left wing/half was continually weakened as he was compelled to bolster the

defence at left-back, as Kyle Maclean was never effectively marked out, continually winning the niche behind half-back and back, whether right or left.

With a disjointed midfield, except when Domhnall Mackay energized the pack or Scott Macaulay supplied, there was little ammunition and Jack Buchanan and Fraser Macleod had fewer and fewer bullets to fire. When yet another stalwart, David Beaton, was stretchered off in the 88th minute, he carried Carloway's hopes for the HAC - and perhaps the Season - on his lap.

Carloway Man of the Match: Domhnall Mackay

Avoch Man of the Match: Kyle Maclean