

League table before tonight's game.

Just over a year ago, Carloway - and most of Uig District - travelled north-east to Barvas, confident that the Blues would write a new page in the club annals by securing their first-ever League Championship in, probably, the most significant west Lewis derby ever played. The mission was successful, though by no means a stroll in the sun. Duncan Maclean had immediately cancelled out Fraser Macleod's early strike and it had taken the Blues until the 59th minute to get one hand on the trophy, courtesy of a piece of opportunism from Seumas Macleod, before a late Exocet from "Frazmac" finally killed off the Siarachs who had pushed na Gormaich hard throughout.

Time and the tides move on relentlessly, in every area, including football, and by the most poignant of ironies, the Champions once more were required to visit Barvas, but this time they came in search of a victory to claw them back into the Championship race and, in so doing, damage their opponents' chances of replacing them as Champions. The omens were not auspicious: after a hard-fought 1-1 League draw at Cnoc a' Choilich in late April, the Blues had fallen to the Barvas men twice in Cup Finals, 0-5 in the ABC and 1-2 in the EaF, and their injury list was awesome.

Out for the season were prominent performers that evening, David Beaton, Iain Angus "Gus" Maciver, Dan Crossley, and Murdo "Squegg" Macleod, while significant others - Seumas Macleod, Scott Macaulay, and Fraser Macleod - worked off-island, and Calum Tom Moody had joined Lochs. Substitutes, Craig Hacker, Calum Mackay, and Ben Smith, no longer featured either. Domhnall Mackay had been on honeymoon that night, so the only repeat performers were Cameron "Tiger" MacArthur, Donald "D.I." MacLennan, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, Kevin "Barra" Macneil, and Jack Buchanan.

Most of the 2013 Siarachs reprised their roles, however, though Donald "Spike" Smith was now at Point, Timmy Hunter at United, and Dan Macphail unavailable. Unfortunately, Avicii wasn't performing in Glasgow this year, so Ali "Barvas" Macleod and Innes Iain Morrison appeared. An even odder quirk of fate saw West's last line of defence in last season's game, Gordon Craigie, between the sticks for the Blues tonight. Graeme "Windy" Miller did not have his problems to seek; they clamoured at the dressing-room door.

After the heady euphoria of an HAC Final appearance, Carloway's season - and form - seemed to have descended into catastrophic free-fall, although the seeds of the decline, perhaps, arrived a fortnight earlier with "Gus's" season-ending concussion at Fivepenny. The Yangtse Dam was suddenly removed from central defence, and also inspirational educational support for "Tiger" and "D.I." Of course, Captain Marvel, Domhnall Mackay, retreated to "Gus's"

position and when class playmaker, Dan Crossley, joined "Gus" on the sidelines, a void as large as the Lochnagar Crater at la Boisselle on the Somme was now apparent in central midfield, and ammunition supply to the explosive goal-getter, Jack Buchanan, evaporated.

Fortunately, Phil Macleod was home on leave and occupied central defence between "Tiger" and "D.I.", just back to distinctly un-Salou weather. Kevin "Barra" Macneil occupied an unfamiliar role to the right of Mackay, and the rest of the starting line-up was an accustomed pattern, although, once more, "Windy" had visited Carlabhagh Croileagan to fill the bench, Calum Iain Macleod excepted. Martin Stewart was preferred to Martainn Shields at left half/wing for the challengers, but the rest of the tightest squad on the island picked itself thereafter.

Carloway **HAD** to win; it was best for Westside to win. A loss or draw would not rule them out of the race, but hand the initiative to Lochs, coming up fast on the rails, especially after those two dropped points last Monday at Garrabost. More and more, it seemed that September's confrontation at Barvas between Westside and Lochs would decide the title, and, naturally, it was preferable for either to enter the contest knowing that their opponents **HAD** to win, not them.

Torrential rain continued unabated, as Carloway opened smoothly, an early corner from Macaskill's right being met on the penalty spot by Mackay but his downward glance goal-wards was booted clear, only for a quick 1-2 on the left between "Barra" and Johnson midway within the West half to send "Barra" into the left corner of the box, but his low drive went straight to the keeper by the near post.

Gradually Westside asserted themselves and in 8 minutes a Stewart corner on Craigie's left led to a scramble in the Blues' box. Craigie came out to punch the high ball across his area, 10 metres out, but the ball whipped backwards off his arm and Macleod, falling backward on the line, seemed to block it with a combination of arm and chest, before the ball was sent whizzing down the park. Moments later, Ali "Barvas" was freed down the right by Morrison but his drive from the edge of the box was blocked expertly by Craigie at the near post. It only delayed the opener by two minutes. A Maclean free-kick, 10 metres outside the Carloway box on the right, found an advancing row of Siarachs racing behind the defence, 12 metres from goal. Graham reverse-headed low to "Van Der Sar's" left but the keeper got down to get a hand to it to push it leftwards along his line. However, an unmarked Ali "Barvas" stopped texting for a moment to step forward and stroke it home **(0-1)**.

Both sides' game-plan soon manifested itself: Phil Macleod as anchor, covering "D.I." on Innes Iain Morrison and "Tiger" on Martin Stewart, the latter regularly withdrawing to left-half to track "Dokus" and draw "Tiger" out, leaving space for Scott Graham to win to Macleod's right. MacDonald was delegated to stand on "Barvas's" toes but with "Barra" providing quality support to Mackay in his head-to-head with West's enforcer, Ali Williamson, "Squegg's" absence was significant to the left as Gordon Campbell played the entire West right behind "Barvas", and coped with Johnson. Colin George Morrison and Scott Graham remained unanswered problems throughout. Campbell Macdonald stuck to Jack Buchanan like a glove, but let the midfield take care of him - and "Wee John" - as they tracked back more and more often as the game progressed in search of the missing ball.

Lack of supply was their problem. Traffic flowed inexorably towards Craigie. In 24 minutes a downwards Colin George header, from directly in front of goal, 10 metres out, off a Maclean corner on Craigie's left, was scrambled clear by the goalie, then fired back in, only for "Dokus" to clear off the line by the right-hand post. Four minutes later, yet another free-kick, all the way from the right centre-line, was met by an unmarked Innes Iain, just inside the centre of the Carloway box. His bullet header was parried high upwards and outwards by a startled Craigie, but Maclean's shot from the 18 metres-line went harmlessly past to the left. On the half-hour a "Barra" break on the right saw him cut the ball back low from the bye-line to Johnson, arriving on the right edge of the box. However, his first-time attempt trundled well-wide of Macaskill's right-hand post.

A minute later slack play on the left edge of the box led to a second goal. Failure to get an incisive tackle in allowed both Morrisons to 1-2 around Blues' defenders and Colin George to fire a low diagonal towards the right of Craigie's box, where Martin Stewart reacted first to step around "Tiger" unhindered and guide the ball well away from the keeper and low inside his left-hand post (**0-2**).

Two flurries from the Blues concluded the half: in 37 minutes Mackay met a Johnson corner from Macaskill's right directly in front of goal on the penalty spot, but his glancing header swished away to the left. Two minutes from the whistle a "Dokus" free-kick just inside the West half, after a foul by Donnie "No" on Buchanan, was tipped over by Macaskill.

Half-time: Westside 2 Carloway 0

As the monsoon conditions continued undiminished, a gentleman's agreement might have been suggested to conclude affairs at half-time with a handshake and a 2-0 victory to the Siarachs. No such luck! A further 45

minutes of torment ensued, though an immediate Colin George strike decided the outcome. As the Carloway defence crowded the goal-line, a Maclean corner from Craigie's left was met by an unmarked Colin George directly in front of goal, 10 metres out, and his header crashed home waist-high to the keeper's left (**0-3**).

Three minutes later Craigie had to look smart to block Ali Williamson's long-range trundler from 20 metres, low to his right. Colin George followed up to fire against the prostrate keeper, before Maclean fired the rebound high over from the edge of the box.

In 54 minutes Macaskill reacted high to his left to hold a "Dokus" attempt from the right edge of the box, but then, on the hour, occurred what might, or should, have been a significant helping hand to the Blues' chances with a second yellow card for the irrepressible thorn-in-the-flesh, Ali "Barvas", apparently for a foul on "Dokus". However, the pattern of play did not change, though the pace slackened, as Carloway huffed and puffed to take advantage of the extra man, but without any discernible results.

In 67 minutes the Blues almost regained a foothold in the game when "D.I." met a "Dokus" corner from Macaskill's left on the penalty spot, but his header crashed off the top of the bar and in the ensuing melée the ball cleared for another corner. Five minutes later it really was all over with a goal that comprehensively summed up the Blues' night of misery. A disputed free-kick, awarded for a tackle on Williamson, arrived, just outside the box to Craigie's right. Up stepped Scott Graham to send the sweetest - and simplest - of right-foot Beckhams just over the wall and deep into the unguarded right-hand side of the Carloway net (**0-4**). If he had added, "*That's how it's done, boys*", to the stupefied Blues' wall, who could have blamed him?

A minute later a Carloway break down the left allowed Buchanan to win a rebound forward, midway within the left of the West half, then supply the ball forward on the left to the unmarked Harris. He checked, then 18 metres from the line sent a low curving ball behind the retreating defence for "Dokus" to win in front of Maclean, but his flick from 10 metres, directly in front of goal, was parried, then held, by Macaskill, shoulder-high to his left.

With four minutes remaining on the clock, a double block by Craigie saved Carloway the ignominy of losing a fifth. A fast break down the left saw Graham, midway within the Blues' half, on the left touch-line, fire in a low, diagonal cross for Innes Iain to meet 16 metres from goal, but Craigie was out like a flash to block. Williamson ground in the rebound but again the keeper, flat-out, blocked, then somehow managed to hold at Campbell's feet.

Full-time: Westside 4 Carloway 0

The nightmares continue to arrive. A collective visit to a local psychiatrist may be necessary to alleviate a pervasive gloom surrounding the club. The first hour last year had been a delicately-balanced affair, and either side could easily have emerged victorious. Not tonight, unfortunately, as Carloway surrendered their title tamely. Indeed, Westside found the weather a greater adversary than the Blues were.

Last September the Siarachs had looked like Champions-in-waiting. Tonight they competed as if determined to seize their first-ever Championship, and who could say they wouldn't deserve it on this display, in such uncompromising conditions: first to every ball; rapid movement into good position off it; and general awareness of the overall flow of the game. What distinguished the sides was the Siarachs' symbiotic awareness of where every team-mate was, or would be, so movement and dispatch became instinctive; while the Blues suffered because of the last three weeks' constant enforced personnel change and positioning. Individual skill and commitment - from Domhnall Mackay, Phil Macleod, "D.I.", Jack Flash, and "Wee John", especially - was of little consequence as the sum of these parts didn't lead to any greater whole - indeed, to no cohesive whole, at all, as West instantly were on each to close down any creative play.

Both sides had everything to play for, but whether Carloway gradually developed a lack of appetite to engage with an unfamiliar system or there was an inability to read each other's moves or intentions, Westside were clearly hungrier for the ball, to make it work, and, in true Lochies' style, played 1-2s and Dutch triangles around a static opposition and down both Blues' flanks, to stretch and/or get behind the last line. Thankfully for na Gormaich, the conditions and the departure of main tormentor, Ali "Barvas", on the hour limited any Siarach possibility of really boosting their goal difference as Carloway floundered around ineffectually, causing their departing fan base to seriously wonder how a team within touching distance of HAC glory could plummet so dramatically down the ratings within three weeks. How to raise the spirits of a depleted squad, never mind develop a combative, effective game plan, seems to be the first priority. Perhaps damage limitation, then a fully-fit squad in the spring may be more attainable.

Westside Man of the Match: Colin George Morrison.

Carloway Man of the Match: Donald "D.I." MacIennan.