

Lewis and Harris League:

Carloway 2 (1) Ness 2 (1)

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 14 Jack Dunlop 22

Johnny Wallace(o.g.) 51 Craig Harris 84

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Monday, 1.9.14.

Referee: Neil Macritchie.

Carloway line judge: Paul Forster.

Ness line judge: Allan Macleod

MANAGER: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Gordon Craigie

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Phil Macleod Donald "D.I." Maclennan

Lee Johnson Kevin "Barra" Macneil Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Murdo "Squegg" Macleod Archie "Statto" MacDonald

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Jack Buchanan

Subs.: Mark Macleod (Lee Johnson) 76; Josh Harris (Kevin "Barra" Macneil) 85.

Subs. not used: Ross "Tiny" Maclean; Graham Thomson.

Yellow cards: Gordon Craigie 32.

If Guus Hiddink had leaned in the dressing-room door at 6.15 tonight and whispered, "*Learn from it and move on!*", the Carloway squad - or what remained of it - might not have been surprised. No more Maori *hakas* emanate from the home dressing-room prior to kick-offs. Instead each match since August 2nd has been more likely to begin with a rendition of Jerome Kern's "*Take a deep breath - - - and start all over again*". Extensive injury to key players has led to a catastrophic free-fall in form and performance, although elements of team play and attitude in the Cuach a' Cho-op Cup Final suggested that the decline might have been arrested to a certain extent and some stability restored within a settled, though weakened, squad for the final three League games.

Tonight was the first test for this hopefully re-awakened team spirit, though yet again there were enforced changes to the line-up. Kevin "Gochan" Macleod and Kenny "Beag" Maclennan, substantial contributors on August 23rd, were both unavailable, so Lee Johnson moved outwards to right wing/half, and Kevin "Barra" Macneil, an unused substitute in the Final, came in on Domhnall Mackay's right, the influential Murdo "Squegg" Macleod on his left. Work commitments ruled out John "Wee John" MacDonald, and youth once more dominated the reduced bench, with Ross "Tiny" Maclean, Graham Thomson, Mark Macleod, and Josh Harris.

The motivation of their opponents was noticeably rampant as good form had arrived at a critical time for the Niseachs, late in the season, as they headed towards a Moldova Lewis Cup Final appearance the following Saturday and, perhaps, a first Cup success since 2009. Carloway had recorded a bitterly-contested 3-2 victory in

the reverse League fixture, a stormy, bad-tempered affair in late July, though the EaF encounters witnessed more convincing displays from the Blues, 4-2 (h) and 7-4 (a).

Tonight third place in the League was the prize sought by na Gormaich as they led Ness by a point, with two games in hand, this being Ness's final League game. Thus a draw would be enough for the Blues. History also favoured the hosts as Ness had failed to record a League victory at Cnoc a' Choilich since July 2004.

Carloway's declining fortunes were starkly reflected in the poor attendance on this cloudy, unseasonably cold evening. Ness won the toss and used a strong, gusting westerly to force the pace eagerly in the opening minutes, though close control was a problem for both sides. Uncomfortable pressure on the back-line from Craig Harris and Jack Dunlop, supplied by deep-lying *trequartista*, Andrew "Bubble" Macleod, was alleviated in the 7th minute by a flighted forward ball by Mackay, from the centre circle, clearing a high Niseach defence. As Buchanan whizzed towards it, "Sweeney" came to collect, but a racing Wallace got there before him to hook backwards and away to the Niseach right. "Dokus" pounced on the swirling ball, midway within their half, in the inside-left position, then sent an exquisitely measured lob-shot over the stranded keeper - but just over his left-hand bar.

In 14 minutes the striker was more successful - and how! A trademark Johnson long throw, 12 metres from the bye-line on the right, was met square by Mackay on the near side of the box. He back-headed the ball onwards and "Dokus", directly in front of goal, met it on the volley to send an unstoppable bullet home, waist-high to "Sweeney's" right (**1-0**).

Three minutes later Ness almost gifted Carloway a second. A loose ball forward was chased by Buchanan and once more "Sweeney" rushed out to the edge of his box. As Wallace shielded the ball towards his keeper, a moment's indecision between them allowed Buchanan to touch the ball away from them, to the keeper's right, then flick the ball immediately with the outside of his right foot towards the unguarded goal. Fortunately for the Niseachs, the young striker didn't connect cleanly and a fast-reacting Wallace, miraculously, managed to get back and somehow knock the ball away for a corner on the left from just inside "Sweeney's" right-hand post.

As Carloway's confidence grew, the defence moved high but this allowed more space for the pacy Harris and Dunlop to challenge "D.I." and "Tiger". A long-range effort zoomed a metre wide of Craigie's left-hand post, before the equalizer arrived in 22 minutes. A Russell-Smith forward ball down the left saw Harris moving wide of "Tiger" to the left touch-line. He checked, 20 metres from the bye-line, then sent a head-high square ball across goal. It escaped "Bubble" but Dunlop gathered by the far post, steadied himself, then sent a glorious right-foot drive high to Craigie's left (**1-1**).

The contrast in approach was marked: though Ness kept it low and controlled

across the midfield, the long ball was used repeatedly to break forward at speed, though regularly over-hit; Carloway stuck doggedly to a La Liga-style, sometimes suicidally across the defence, preferring to come forward low, and only Mackay and "Squegg" were prepared to risk the de Boers, to find Johnson, "Dokus", and Buchanan.

On 25 minutes Johnson reprised his earlier long throw, this time from the corner flag, but this time, Mackay, 12 metres out by the near post, headed into the side-netting. On the half-hour, a "Sqweg" diagonal found Buchanan moving forward leftwards, on to the edge of the box, but Wallace was quick to close him down and block his effort. The ball spun leftwards towards "Dokus" but "Sweeney" was alive to the danger and rushed out to block "Dokus's" snap-shot brilliantly to his right, 10 metres off his goal-line.

Three minutes later a dangerous throw-out by Craigie caught Phil Macleod unprepared, just outside the left of his box. An alert Dunlop robbed the unfortunate defender, then stepped forward to scoop the ball over the stranded keeper, but somehow managed to send it past Craigie's right-hand post. A definite candidate for *"miss of the season"*!

The half concluded with "Dokus" winning the ball midway within the Niseach half, then sending a perfect McIlroy rightwards for Johnson to get behind Ali Morrison, wide of Wallace, but from 16 metres he sliced his right-foot drive well-wide of "Sweeney's" left-hand post.

Half-time: Carloway 1 Ness 1

The spectacle had been less than edifying, as both sides struggled to harness the harsh elements, and the consequent absence of controlled play - except from the likes of "Bubble", Russell-Smith, "Squegg", and "Dokus" - had minimised opportunity.

The unforgiving wind again featured prominently in the opening minutes of the second half. On 51 minutes "Statto" found the roving "Dokus" on the right touch-line, just inside the Niseach half. He managed to elude "Cheeks" down the line, then 20 metres from the bye-line, then checked back away from Ali Morrison, to send a waist-high diagonal speeding into the box. The unfortunate Wallace, 16 metres out by the near post, in trying to cut the danger out, managed to touch the ball just enough to dummy his own keeper by diverting the ball slightly as it whizzed across the 6-metre area and inside the far post (**2-1**).

Ness responded three minutes later when "Bubble" was freed to jink his way to the right touch-line, then whip across a sharp, low cross towards goal, only for Craigie to react instinctively and push the ball away, under pressure, by his left-hand post. Minutes later, after a strong penalty claim by the Niseachs when a crashing "D.I." tackle halted Dunlop's progress into the right of the Carloway box, the striker once

more was sent behind the line by a Russell-Smith forward ball into the left of the Blues' box. Craigie was out like lightning to block him to his right, but Dunlop recovered on the bye-line to return the ball towards goal before Macleod arrived to boot clear for a corner.

Na Gormaich were visibly dying as a cohesive force, with a disjointed mid-line failing to supply "Dokus" or Jack Flash, nor covering a porous defence. As Johnson and MacDonald sank back to augment the line, Ness ran freer and freer in and through the midfield. The phrase, "*one-way traffic*" now sprang to mind and Jack Dunlop appeared to embark on a personal mission to win the title, "*The greatest number of sitters that can be missed in a Lewis and Harris League match*".

In 62 minutes a Harris free-kick, 20 metres out on Craigie's right, was flighted invitingly across the area but carried beyond his left-hand post. A minute later a "Cheeks" forward ball straight forward sent Dunlop behind "Tiger" towards the left of the Carloway box but his powerful low drive from 18 metres travelled a metre wide of the far post. In 71 minutes "Bubble" artistry on the right took him beyond Macleod and "D.I." to the right bye-line, and his perfect low cut-back made it easy for Dunlop, arriving in front of Harris, directly in front of goal, 8 metres out, but he somehow managed to crash his rocket-shot up and over and away into Garenin. A minute later the Carloway keeper again had to look sharp by reacting carefully, high at the top of his right-hand post, to push a dangerous cross from Calum Vann away for a corner.

A series of corners ensued. Then on 84 minutes Ness finally registered an overdue equalizer. Yet another surge allowed Russell-Smith to supply Dunlop on the left where he out-paced "Tiger" on the outside to make the bye-line, then travel inwards. Ten metres out, he attempted to slip the ball round Craigie's left by the near post; the keeper second-guessed him but could only push the ball outwards and onwards, thereby wrong-footing the covering Macleod and permitting the unmarked Harris to stroll in and wham it home (2-2).

Two minutes later a nightmarish second half for the Blues was almost capped by a late Niseach winner. More suicidal close passing by the Blues in the centre circle allowed Russell-Smith and "Bubble" to win the ball, then combine to send Dunlop behind the line and into the box in the centre, but as he struggled to line the ball up to strike, "D.I." recovered admirably to race back and John Greig the unlucky striker.

Full-time: Carloway 2 Ness 2

Ouch! Overall, this was a night to forget for the Blues. The second half was akin to one of those experiences where you are unsure whether you are actually awake or are in an extremely realistic nightmare. It's difficult to figure out the exact cause of the malaise that affected the squad tonight. On paper, the selection, based on available personnel, looked sound. For the first half-hour, apart from lack of pace and movement moving forward, it functioned appropriately. The only obvious lack seemed a slackness in seizing any initiative that presented itself.

No team should be criticised for attempting to play football - to keep the ball on the ground, to pass the ball, to keep to a framework - but at times the Blues' reliance on the *totalvoetbal* model created opportunities for the opposing attack and inevitably led to desperate defending, while the failure to exploit opportunities that appeared suddenly downfield, as an eager Ness outfit committed themselves, over and over down the field, were unexplored as na Gormaich tried to play their way downfield. Admirable, no doubt, but not always effective.

However, a more immediate problem seemed to be the spirit - or lack of it - in the team after Ness first equalized, as conviction seemed to drain away rapidly and the contest more and more resembled a very unwelcome chore that had to be fulfilled, something to get over with as quickly as possible. Only an extensive holiday away from the pitch can cure that feeling, if it is correct.

For various reasons, the season is winding down unhappily for the Blues. All the early successes, bringing all sorts of silverware within arms' reach, has suddenly, within the space of a calendar month, been erased from the collective memory of the entire Uig district so that a successful season - four Cup Finals, a first-ever HAC Final, a 3rd place in the League - now seems to have been a failure. Unfulfilled ambition – for whatever reason - does corrode a person/team inwardly and this may now be the Blues' problem, not lack of skill, talent, or commitment in the players. Unfortunately, Hiddink's admonitions did not cover this precise problem.

Carloway Man of the Match: Gordon Craigie.

Ness Man of the Match: Andrew "Bubble" Macleod.