

Lewis and Harris League:

Back 1 (0) Carloway 1 (0)

Stuart Macdonald 69 Domhnall Mackay 90+2

At Col Uarach.

Friday, 24.4.14.

Referee: Neil Macritchie.

Stand-side line judge: Donald "Dano".MacDonald

Far-side line judge: Paul Forster.

CARLOWAY.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Gordon Craigie

*Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Chris "Christy" Smith
Kevin "Barra" Macneil ■ Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Phil Macleod Kyle Brunton Ali
"Laxay" Macdonald*

Jack Buchanan Josh Harris

Subs.used: Lee Johnson (Josh Harris) 51; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod (Kyle Brunton) 73 ■

Subs. not used: David "Lurch" Murray; Andrew Macleod; Joe Armstrong.

Yellow cards: Kevin "Barra" Macneil 52; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod 80

Tonight Carloway made their first visit of the season to Col Uarach, once one of their least favoured venues, alongside Barvas and Sgoil nan Loch. However, the 2011 Champions have fallen away alarmingly in the last four years, even losing 0-7 to na Gormaich in the corresponding fixture last August, and eventually finishing 7th out of nine in the League last season. In addition, the close season has seen the retirals of D.J. Macdonald and the talismanic Murray Macleod, and the departures of Andrew "Mowgli" Macleod (to Point) and David Maclean.

Their decline must send warning signals to Carloway - and to Athletic - to avoid the same fate. Jason Macleod was also absent tonight, giving new manager, Kenneth "Bugsy" Smith, further selection problems. Indeed, apart from the familiar faces of Michael Maciver in goal, ex-Blue Ali "Tolsta" Maciver in central defence, Chris Macleod in central midfield, and Stuart Macdonald up front, the Bacachs were unrecognizable and had the appearance of a Nicolson Under-16 side.

Not that Graeme "Windy" Miller was spoiled for choice either. There was the usual list of walking wounded - David Beaton, Dan Crossley, Murdo "Sqweg"

Macleod, and Donald "D.I." MacIennan, while the inspirational Billy Anderson was unavailable (at a wedding in Inverness). Ross Maciver was not available either, while Lee Johnson, once more, was not risked from the beginning, joining David "Lurch" Murray, Stuart "Gochan" Macleod, Andrew Macleod, and Joe Armstrong in the bull-pen. Blues' veteran, Chris "Christy" Smith, made his first start of the season at left-back/stopper, and this allowed Phil Macleod, whose all-round effectiveness was sacrificed in Ness at left-back, to adopt the holding midfield role vacated by Anderson. However, the problem so far had not been in defence or midfield, both watertight, but up front. Not that Jack Buchanan or Josh Harris lack the skill or effort to provide the goals, simply they lack quality supply.

It was certainly changed days from the nerve-tingling confrontations between the two sides between 2011-2013. A beautiful setting sun illuminated Col Uarach as a bitterly cutting nor'-west-northerly froze the bones of a sparse crowd. There was almost an explosive start, once a regular feature of Carloway games, as the ball broke right away to Chris Macleod, moving into the Blues' half in the centre. He immediately transferred a diagonal to his right to send Stuart Macdonald zooming through behind "Christy" to the corner of the box, but his low right-footer was sent wide of the approaching Craigie and two metres wide of the far post.

The pace of the Back wingers was clearly troubling "Tiger" and "Christy", plus their eagerness to run with the ball and take the backs on. Also, with "Christy" tending to move to the centre to support Mackay, it meant Chris Macleod was able to exploit the space afforded on the back right, and soon, although the Blues' back-line tried to defend deep and play out carefully, too much space was left wide for the young men to run at them.

In 10 minutes a trip on Brunton, 22 metres out on the right, allowed a short Macleod free-kick to "Dokus" but his low effort was blocked in the box, and the ensuing scramble was only ended when "Tolsta" booted the ball into Broadbay. Three minutes later, Carloway's first real concerted attack gave hope: na Gormaich's main *animateur* of the night, "Dokus", displayed characteristic trickery on the left touchline, midway within the Back half, to win a corner. The ball was headed out as far as Macleod, who moved it to "Christy", and he immediately fed "Barra" on the right. He and Mackay wall-passed and the wing-man sped towards the right side of the box, provoking a clumsy trip by James Morrison, who unfortunately broke his ankle in the process. Macleod's low free-kick ran straight to Maciver, however.

On 17 minutes "Christy" released an unmarked "Laxay" down the left to carry the ball to the edge of the box, ten metres in from the touch-line. His inviting squared cross reached "Dokus", lurking 20 metres out by the right of the box,

but his first-time right-footer flew a metre over the bar. On 21 minutes suicidal La Liga-style play out of defence compromised Brunton midway within his own half, towards the right touch-line. As he struggled to control the ball under pressure, No. 4 knocked the ball away from him, and as he stabbed at the ball, it ricocheted off the left-winger forward behind Mackay for the lurking Macleod to ghost on to and forward. He carried it to the penalty spot, and as Craigie came and spread himself, side-footed it with his right foot high to Craigie's left - but a foot outside the left upright. What a let-off for the Blues! No wonder Chris held his head in his hands.

The determination to play out of defence and build forward, the *totalvoetbal* concept, led to more mayhem on the half-hour, when "Tiger" had difficulty controlling the short throw-out from Craigie, was robbed by the left-winger who made the bye-line but delayed to survey his options and Mackay managed to block for a corner.

It was 37 minutes before Carloway threatened again, when "Dokus" created space for himself to supply "Barra" moving into the Back half on the right. His cross, 20 metres from the bye-line was slightly overhit, but Harris managed to play it back to Macleod, on the edge of the area; however, his effort was charged down and cleared. A minute later another "Dokus" free-kick, 20 metres out in the centre, hit the wall, before, two minutes later, a Macleod tackle thwarted a Back break, 10 metres inside his own half in the centre, and allowed "Niseach" to feed Brunton, who in turn supplied Harris. The young star set off on a pacy, swirling run into the Bacach box, only to be sent crashing from a saving tackle by No.6, which cost a corner on the left.

Half-time: Back 0 Carloway 0

It had been an unpromising first half, with neither side suggesting hope for improvement in the second or the future. Back are young and may prosper; "Bugsy", no doubt, just needs to be patient. Carloway were in difficulty: the back-line's desire to defend deep and tight was allowing too much freedom wide to pacy wing-men, while a lack of leadership in midfield contributed to a lack of cohesion coming forward and meant Harris and Buchanan had to retreat deep in search of the ball, then have a half and several opponents to overcome to break through. "Dokus" was imaginative and "Barra" assertive on the right but Phil Macleod had his hands full combating his namesake, hence any attacking influence was blunted.

In 46 minutes a "Tolsta" free-kick, midway within the Carloway half, in the centre, led to a pinball melée in the Blues' box, before being blocked outwards, then a quick shot being deflected past Craigie's left-hand post by a deflection off a Bacach heel. Four minutes later, the Blues sighed another

enormous sigh of relief when the Bacachs failed to convert another glorious opportunity: a scintillating run by No. 8 carried him through the centre into na Gormaich's half; he then slipped the ball behind Mackay and past "Tiger" for Macleod to glide in leftwards into the box. As Craigie came towards him, he sent it past him to his left, but had the misfortune to strike the base of the keeper's left-hand post and out.

The hour had passed before Carloway had their first half-chance, with Jack Buchanan winning a tackle out on the right, then sending the ball straight forward to Lee Johnson. He left his marker for dead, then crept into the right side of Back's box, but his fiery cross simply raged into the right side of Maciver's netting. On 65 minutes a "Barra" low cross, 20 metres out, by the right touch-line was knocked out to Brunton but his low shot was touched past the right-hand post by Maciver.

The game appeared to have 0-0 written all over it when Back suddenly produced a flowing forward movement to take a deserved lead: a skirmish on the Back right supplied "Tolsta" deep in his own half, and he in turn fed No. 11 in the centre, who whizzed forward through the centre into the Blues' half. Macleod headed off on the dummy run leftwards, taking "Tiger" with him, and the winger wrong-footed the defence by slipping it right to Macdonald, breaking unmarked behind Smith and Mackay. As Craigie jettied out to block, the striker glided the ball neatly under him to his right, just inside the keeper's right-hand post (**1-0**).

Needs must when the devil drives. A desperate Carloway rang the changes: Macleod withdrew to centre back and Mackay became attacking midfielder, supporting "Dokus"; Stuart "Gochan" replaced Brunton. With "Dokus" creeping left and "Barra" repeatedly dropping back to initiate faster forward runs on the right, space appeared in the centre. However, a high back-line in support of this new impetus allowed greater opportunity for Macdonald, Macleod, *et al.* But the chances still did not appear.

It was 85 minutes before Maciver was next tested, Johnson trying his luck in the centre from 30 metres, but the keeper parried it easily to his left. What seemed to be the final chance of the game was a Chris Macleod free-kick from 22 metres clearing Craigie's bar by two metres. However, two minutes into added-on time, na Gormaich produced an unlikely equalizer. A curling right-foot free-kick from "Dokus", just inside the Bacach half, by Back's right touch-line, seemed to be turning head-high outside Maciver's right-hand post, when Mackay detached himself from the assembled multitude to meet it with his back to goal. He head-flicked the ball backwards and inwards over the despairing hands of Maciver, for the ball to drop into goal, despite "Tolsta's" desperate attempt to turn it out (**1-1**).

But it wasn't over yet: in the 94th minute Macdonald managed to win the ball 22 metres out in the centre of the Carloway half and send a sharp low forward pass past Mackay and Macleod for No. 5 to meet, 16 metres out. He turned sharply to the right, away from "Tiger", rode a Smith tackle, then slipped the ball low to Craigie's right. However, the keeper was out like lightning, and stuck out a right leg as long as the Skye Bridge to pull off a point-saving block.

Full-time: Back 1 Carloway 1

This was certainly a performance that Carloway fans would like to pretend never happened. An eager, pacy young Back side may have lacked tactical nous and cohesion but should still have run out comfortable winners. Though Domhnall Mackay was dominant in central defence, the tightness of the back-line allowed unlimited freedom on the wing to Back; "Barra" and "Laxay" spent most of the game undecided whether they were attack-minded defenders whose main task was to protect "Tiger" and "Christy" or deep-lying attackers setting up Buchanan and Harris, though "Barra's" pace served him well in both roles, as required.

The midfield lacked a leader and never really "*clicked*" throughout. Phil Macleod and Kyle Brunton were preoccupied with Chris Macleod and "Dokus" missed the support of Billy Anderson as he twisted and turned all over the middle of Col Uarach, attempting to release "Barra" with the golden diagonal or supply the defence-splitters forward to the strikers. Unfortunately, both Jack Buchanan and Josh Harris were once again starved of ammunition and repeatedly retreated in search of the ball. When they did receive it, they invariably were static, facing their own goal, and with a marker leaning heavily on their shoulders. And with Ali "Tolsta" Maciver in faultless mode at the back, Michael Maciver did not really have that much to do.

Four games have produced two goals: one the result of goalkeeping clanger, the other scored by the centre-half. What was a concern is starting to look like a problem.

Back Man of the Match: Ali "Tolsta" Maciver.

Carloway Man of the Match: Domhnall Mackay.