

Lewis and Harris League:

## **Ness 0 (0) Carloway 2 (1)**

*Ali "Laxay" Macdonald 44*

*Jack Buchanan 70*

*At Fivepenny.*

*Monday, 4.5.15.*

*Referee: Calum "Chancy" Macleod..*

*Carloway line judge: Andrew Macleod.*

**CARLOWAY.**

*Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.*

*Gordon Craigie*

*Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Calum Tom Moody*

*Mark "Cirbhig" Macleod Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Billy Anderson ■ Murdo "Sqweg"*

*Macleod ■ Ali "Laxay" Macdonald*

*Lee Johnson Jack Buchanan*

*Subs.used: Chris "Christy" Smith (Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod) 65; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod (Mark "Cirbhig" Macleod) 79; Graham Macdonald (Lee Johnson) 87.*

*Subs. not used: Ross "Tiny" Maclean; Joe Armstrong.*

*Yellow cards: Billy Anderson 50; Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod 62*

**NESS.**

*Manager: Chris Macdonald.*

*Jack Dunlop Andrew "Bubble" Macleod*

*John Alexander Maciver Craig Harris Innes Smith Micheil Russell-Smith*

*? Neil Morrison (capt.) Ali Morrison Darren "Cage" Wilson ■*

*Donald "Sweeney" Macsween*

*Yellow card: Darren "Cage" Wilson 52.*

After the less than enjoyable experience at Lionacleit on Saturday, mainly a reflection on a threadbare squad, and the consequent necessity to patch together a new line-up, it was back to League business at Fivepenny tonight, and the continuing quest for the first League victory of 2015. The Blues' first three League games had unwelcome similarities: a marked inability to find the target, never mind score, except from set-pieces, caused mainly by an aimless lack of positivity and cohesion through the midfield. Hence, there were few bullets to fire. An extensive injury list had provoked this, although

the squad tonight evinced the first glimmers of a return to the preferred line-up.

Unfortunately, Norman "Taz" Morrison was still in Fife and Phil Macleod was again off-island, this time for three weeks; Donald "D.I." MacIennan had returned to work this past fortnight but was still not fully match-fit. Josh Harris was now out (hamstring) and Kevin "Barra" Macneil was also unavailable, but the good news - yes, there was some! - was that Calum Tom Moody was available, and began, unusually, on left defence; the inspirational Billy Anderson was back in central midfield, alongside another oldie-but-goldie, Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod, who returned in Benbecula, on his left; and the much-missed Lee Johnson added pace and support to Jack Buchanan up front against his old club.

The strength of the club was demonstrated by the quality of the backing provided by the young bloods, Mark "Cirbhig" Macleod, who started at right-half/wing, and on the bench, Ross "Tiny" Maclean, Joe Armstrong, Graham Macdonald, and Stuart "Gochan" Macleod (who scored his first goal for the club against Eriskay), beside the veteran, Chris "Christy" Smith.

Ness themselves have had a mixed opening to 2015, starting brightly with a 1-0 win over Athletic in the ABC Round 1, before seeing off United and Aths in the League, but elimination from the ABC on penalties by Carloway, coupled with a thrashing by Westside and defeat in the Coop last Saturday against Southend, had no doubt dampened their aspirations. Nevertheless, at first glance, Ness looked more imposing than the side that faced the Blues in the ABC Cup, Micheil Russell-Smith now present in midfield, and perennial pain-in-the-tonsils, Andrew "Bubble" Macleod at right half/wing. The oldest man in Ness, Donald "Sweeney" Macsween, replaced Gordon Kennedy between the posts, but there was no sign of Jamie Feeney or Calum "Dola" Morrison, the latter a stand-out in the ABC Semi-Final, forcing Ali Morrison, influential in that tie also, to drop back to support his name-sake in central defence, with Darren "Cage" Wilson on their right.

For once, it was a pleasant evening at Fivepenny, for players and spectators alike to enjoy a game of football, although the pitch itself looked extremely heavy, due to the various deluges in the past few days. It was difficult to ascertain who had the advantage in the first half, probably the home side, with a reasonably strong south-easterly behind them, but, simultaneously, they had to face into the low setting Spring sun. The opening skirmishes misled the Blues' fans into thinking they had time-travelled backwards a couple of seasons as an ebullient na Gormaich burst from the traps, defying their performances of the last month, to firmly implant themselves in midfield, with the back-line pushing hard behind. Buchanan and Johnson spun and

turned, as “Dokus”, Anderson, and “Sqweg” sought an initial rhythm to liberate them during early pressure.

However, the best early chance fell to Ness, and predictably arrived from “Bubble” on the right, who managed to elude Moody, drive behind “Laxay”, and deliver a nasty square cross, 12 metres from the bye-line. Craigie raced out to fist away from Smith, 12 metres in front of his left-hand post, but Dunlop, following up, tried an immediate header in return, which the keeper managed to claw away to his left for a corner.

In 18 minutes Johnson broke diagonally towards the right behind Maciver, then made 10 metres from the bye-line, but saw his hard, low cross, booted back out by Morrison. From the throw-in, the ball travelled right through to “Dokus”, 20 metres out towards the centre; the midfielder unexpectedly turned left, then sent a dangerous left-footer whizzing over “Sweeney’s” right-side bar. Five minutes later “Dokus” almost registered again, when Anderson released “Laxay” moving towards the box. A heavy tackle by “Cage” saw the ball ricochet unluckily behind the right back to leave “Laxay” clear, but his immediate chip was headed out by Neil Morrison. Again, the lurking “Dokus” met it just outside the box, but his volley again cleared the bar by a couple of feet.

A couple of minutes later, clever dribbling play by Johnson, in the centre saw him move into the Niseach half, then send a beautiful, swerving diagonal rightwards between Morrison and Maciver, for Buchanan to ghost wide of his marker. However, his low hard right-footer from the edge of the box was read by the advancing keeper, who stuck out an enormous right leg to block well. A minute later “Sweeney” had to be vigilant again by moving sharply to his right to fist away another effort from “Dokus” after Macdonald gathered 20 metres out on the left, turned, and whipped in another nasty right-footer.

Although Ness were brisk and competitive, they were struggling to combat a confident Carloway who again surged forward in 31 minutes, “Laxay” meandering past three defenders before lobbing carefully over the central defenders to Buchanan, who had slipped behind Neil Morrison. Unfortunately, he could only jab at the ball spinning away from him and toe-end well-over from 16 metres. Finally, in 38 minutes, a Niseach corner on Craigie’s left delivered an opportunity to the Greens as the ball cleared everyone to reach Russell-Smith, 16 metres out by the far post. He turned inwards but in his haste fired a metre over Craigie’s right-hand bar.

A minute before half-time, however, Ness suffered the cruellest blow at the worst time: Buchanan, battling hard midway within the Ness half in the centre, supplied Johnson, unmarked to his right and he burst forward into the corner

of the box. Again “Sweeney” read the move and was out to block with his foot. The ball spun clear to the keeper’s left, then was knocked back to Buchanan, who had progressed into the right of the box. Eight metres out, by “Sweeney’s” left-hand post, he was blocked by Morrison, the ball ricocheting back and forth off both men, to move square across the face of the goal, for a surprised, unmarked “Laxay” to stab at, perhaps mishit, with his right foot. “Sweeney” moving to the centre, was completely wrong-footed as the ball trickled to his left goalwards, hit the inside of his left-hand post, and entered the net (0-1).

A moment later it could have been much worse when Johnson steamed off on a bewildering run down the right, then cut into the box. He made 8 metres from goal before a mix of “Sweeney” and Morrison managed to block his attempt to round the keeper, then the keeper reacted well to smother his follow-up jab at goal.

**Half-time: Ness 0 Carloway 1**

The late goal must have calmed the Carloway players’ nerves, mindful of many earlier fixtures this season, where teams have repeatedly dominated but failed to turn an early control into goals. In this first half, the Blues had managed to create more goal-worthy chances than they had delivered in their previous half-dozen. The Niseachs, ironically, appeared to be experiencing na Gormaich’s problem from earlier games: a lack of a solid, cohesive midfield, delivering opportunities to free-running front men.

However, a shaft of light did appear for the Niseachs in the opening 15 minutes of the second half as the earlier pace and a lack of match fitness started to affect the returnees in the Blues’ outfit, and a few glimmers arrived for the home side: in 49 minutes, a free-kick on Craigie’s left touch-line, 22 metres from the bye-line, came skiting low into the box, inside the Carloway right-hand post. Craigie had to scramble low to block it outwards off the line, causing an unholy melée within the Blues’ box, where everyone seemed to have a kick at it, before it was booted as far as Skigersta. Two minutes later “Bubble” suddenly found himself free, 20 metres out in the centre, on the end of a Russell-Smith ball, but he snatched his shot a metre wide of Craigie’s left-hand post.

In 57 minutes a Craig Harris free-kick, 24 metres out in the centre, was not too far away, a couple of feet perhaps, as it cleared the Carloway bar, but the turning-point in the team’s fortunes arrived in 64 minutes. A dogged Russell-Smith sent the golden diagonal rightwards for “Bubble” to speed smoothly wide of Moody, behind “Laxay”, then send a crisp low squared ball across the

face of the Carloway area, 16 metres out. It eluded the retreating defence to reach Dunlop, unmarked by the far post, but he took it early, and sent the sweetest of supplies at least a metre over the helpless keeper's bar.

Na Gormaich celebrated by accepting another of the golden eggs that the Ness goose keeps laying for them. In 70 minutes Ness lost the ball just inside the Carloway half in the centre and "Dokus" burst into the opposing half before unleashing the most glorious Yaya Touré pass swirling rightwards over the Morrisons for Buchanan to run on to. The Ness left-back spotted the danger, and managed to edge the young striker out as the two of them wrestled their way to the bye-line, 2-3 metres to "Sweeney's" left. As the back turned to slip it back to his keeper, "Sweeney" advanced, but the defender's underhit return bounced to Buchanan just between them and Buchanan turned, weighed things up, then poked the ball past the stranded keeper with his right foot (**0-2**). A famous saying in Scottish football used to be, "*Firhill for thrills!*". Maybe it should now be, "*Fivepenny for clangers!*"

To say the music died after that would be reasonably accurate, although the Niseachs had one final chance to claw their way back into the game. In 77 minutes. Russell-Smith and "Bubble" combined effectively midway within the Carloway half, and released "Cage" who had started the move, to move forward unmarked towards the bye-line. Sixteen metres from the bye-line, he sent a glorious searching cross to the far post where Dunlop once more appeared unmarked, but again, this time with a clear header, he sent the ball whizzing a metre over the bar.

Three minutes later "Christy" almost rubbed salt in the wound when a break by "Laxay" on the left was cleared out to him, 24 metres out in the centre. Without hesitation, he sent a right-foot rocket high to "Sweeney's" right, but the surprised keeper reacted brilliantly to flick it away over the bar, with his right hand.

**Full-time: Ness 0 (0) Carloway 2 (1)**

It wasn't easy - it never is, taking on the Niseachs on their home patch - but it was encouraging, mainly due to the re-affirmation of the positivity, the grit, and determination which characterized the team's endeavours throughout the 2013 Championship-winning campaign and all the way to a historic HAC Final appearance last season in Inverness. This well-oiled fluency and team understanding gradually dissipated throughout 2014 - for obvious and uncontrollable reasons: a loss of key members of the squad, because of work commitments or retiral, and an unexpectedly large number of long-term injuries to vital members of the pool. However, the fans did not have to look

hard tonight to see why that great side was as great as they were, as the team members who are left, combined with emerging talent, gave intimations that as other valued members return, those returned to the fray gain match fitness, and youth gathers experience, the 2013 team may be emulated.

“Dokus”, Billy Anderson, and “Sqweg” gelled immensely in midfield and repeatedly forced the pace, and needed to, to combat Craig Harris and Micheil Russell-Smith, while Calum Tom Moody was an important bulwark on the left in face of “Bubble”, who only managed to escape his minder infrequently or by roaming apart. The spreading of the load at the back allowed Mackay to be forceful behind the central midfield, and with the supply forward more fruitful for Jack Buchanan to run on to, the young striker went a long way down the road to re-discovering the appetite he had for the ball in his explosive first season, amply abetted by an outstanding first-half contribution from Lee Johnson beside and around him.

**Ness Man of the Match: Micheil Russell-Smith.**

**Carlaway Man of the Match: Kenny “Dokus” Macdonald.**