

Lewis and Harris League:

Stornoway Athletic 3 (2) Carloway 1 (0)

Gary Macleod 15, 23

Domhnall Mackay 77

Warren Mackay 52

At Goathill Park, Stornoway.

Wednesday, 10.06.15.

Referee: Neil Macritchie.

Carloway line judge: Andrew Macleod.

CARLOWAY.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Gordon Craigie

*Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Norman "Taz" Morrison
Lee Johnson Kevin "Barra" Macneill Billy Anderson Chris "Christy" Smith Ali "Laxay"
Macdonald*

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Josh Harris

*Subs. used: Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod (Billy Anderson) 59; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod (Josh
Harris) 77; Graham Macdonald (Domhnall Mackay) 83.*

Subs. not used: David "Lurch" Murray; Euan "a' Ghuilc" Macleod.

No rest for an injury-hit Carloway as only two days after their bore-fest with fellow-strugglers, Back, they had to re-visit a ground they enjoy visiting as much as a visit to the dentist's. Despite last week's 2-0 League victory here over United, na Gormaich's Goathill experiences have been mixed: unbridled joy two years ago in the 6-0 ABC Final drubbing of Back, followed by League-clinching victories 3-0 over rivals and reigning Champions, Athletic, and 4-0 against United.

Prior to this "*Year of Living Gloriously*", however, there had been abject misery in successive Cup Final defeats, losing here 0-4 and 1-4 to Lochs in the Jock Stein and Lewis Cup Finals in 2007; a staggering 0-7 to the same club in the 2009 Jock Stein, then later that same season 1-3 to West Side in the Coop, followed a week later by a humiliating 4-8 League reverse to United. So the sun has only shone occasionally for the Blues in the Big Smoke, until lately, that is, and mainly in the League.

Tonight, "Windy" had once more to use his abacus to juggle the predictable limited availability. Neither Donald "D.I." Maclennan and Jack Buchanan,

though recovered, were match-fit yet, while it was wisest to rest Eachain Miller and Ross Maciver, after their Tuesday night exertions. Worst of all, however, Phil Macleod's left shoulder/arm injury, sustained in Monday night's second half, ruled him out also, plus injury also put paid to former star, Archie "Uibhisteach" MacDonald's intentions to contribute, while back on the island for a few days. An additional blow was a niggling injury to midfield dynamo, Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod, who was compelled to operate as back-up on the bench, beside David "Lurch" Murray, Euan "a' Ghuilc" Macleod, Stuart "Gochan" Macleod, and Graham Macdonald.

Fortunately, the dependable Norman "Taz" Morrison was on hand to fill his customary spot to the left of the deadly duo, Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur and Domhnall Mackay, while Chris "Christy" Smith was introduced as holding midfielder behind Billy Anderson. Kevin "Barra" Macneill moved inside to the right of Anderson, allowing Lee Johnson to occupy the right half/wing spot, with Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald in a forward position beside live-wire, Josh Harris, who adopted the missing Maciver's role.

Athletic, themselves, had not had the kindest of Winter breaks: star midfielder, Rob Jones, had headed south to Lochs; midfield enforcer, Elliot Rudall, east to Point, while Carloway's No. 1 *bête noire*, Scott Maciver, had retired, never really recovering from that broken ankle at Cnoc a' Choilich in the Coop SF in July last year. Island football is all the poorer for his retiral. Another island star, D.J.Clinton, has gone also, while Colin "Titch" Macritchie was out with bruised ribs. So, tonight, apart from the usual tricky combatants: the battle-hardened defenders, Ali "Koch" Morrison and Scott "Flapjack" Macaulay; elegant midfielder, Nic "Nuck" Davis; and dead-ball expert, Gary Macleod, at right midfield, the Athletic team was an unknown quantity, though their 2015 record was on a par with the Blues. How the mighty have fallen! Only one former "Great", Back, was doing worse!

The temperature continued unseasonably cold, but the pitch looked much, much drier than last Wednesday's heavy, tiring surface. Though windless, Carloway's initial problem was to play towards the Drive end, into a brittle, setting sun, and the home side exercised this advantage in the opening ten minutes. A succession of Macleod corners led to nothing, before Anderson won in the ball on the halfway line in the 7th minute and up-and-undered Harris clear, directly in front of him. The young star managed to control the awkward ball as it raced before him into the box, but "Koch" recovered to slide into him at the crucial moment so that his hurried shot from 16 metres cleared the estate and landed in the hospital car park.

A pattern was emerging: "Tiger" was tracking Macleod, mainly operating on Aths' left, while "Laxay" lay deep, keeping inside his former Harris team-mate,

no. 10, who looked keen and charged forward, repeatedly, at pace, while “Taz” kept close to Mackay at the back, to compensate for “Tiger’s” right-sided marking of Macleod. “Barra” functioned mainly as inside-right, beside Anderson, but with “Christy” holding, “Dokus” was more midfield than striker in support against pressure from “Nuck”, Macleod, no. 10, *et al.*

So despite the best efforts of Mackay, Anderson, and “Dokus” to split the back-line with balls to feet, and Johnson, “Barra”, and “Laxay” to get forward on either wing to supply the killer cross, Josh Harris very quickly learnt the Ross Maciver experience, like a tennis pro across the net from Djokovic, trying to second-guess where the next passing shot was going to go. He ran and ran. Then, out of the blue, a sudden glimmer of individual brilliance descended on the broken play: in 14 minutes Davis managed to supply down the left, where from midway inside the Carloway half, the ball was played square inwards to Macleod drifting rightwards across the line. He side-stepped a tackle to his right, then suddenly whipped round with a controlled right-foot drive, which demonstrated exactly why he is the best dead-ball man on the island. By the time Craigie managed to react, the ball was cannoning high of his right-hand post and into the back of the net (**1-0**). Wow! Must have been all of 30 metres!

A minute later Mackay almost made matters a whole lot worse for the Blues when he broke off a Macleod supply out to the right of “Taz”, behind “Laxay”, and into the box, but “Taz” arrived to tackle him, 14 metres from Craigie, and the ball ricocheted harmlessly forward to Craigie. In 22 minutes a Gary Macleod corner on the Carloway right was met neatly by Macaulay, head-high, at the near post, but his onward backward header was read well by Craigie, who smothered low at the near post.

However, a minute later the wheels really came off the Carloway machine, when a Macleod free-kick, midway within the Carloway half, out on their right touch-line, came winging in behind the line. As the retreating battle lines lunged fruitlessly at the bouncing ball, it traversed the goal just out of reach of the surprised keeper, and crept into the side of the far net (**2-0**).

Strangely enough, it had been a comparatively incident-free encounter so far, and na Gormaich found it hard to respond. Their formation was simply not working, with several, e.g. “Tiger”, “Taz”, “Laxay”, and “Barra”, uncomfortable in their roles and Harris left as lonely as Ben Gunn up front. Therefore, it was the 39th minute before anything resembling a “*chance*” appeared. Harris won a corner on the Athletic right and when “Dokus” sent the ball whizzing in, the young striker met it by the near post, to head-flick it onward diagonally across goal, but the pace of the head-pass made it too difficult for Anderson to connect by the far post.

In added-on time another opportunity arrived with a left-foot free-kick from “Dokus”, 20 metres out directly in front of goal, but, though it cleared the wall, it went straight to the keeper.

Half-time: Stornoway Athletic 2 Carloway 0

Na Gormaich had not achieved much in the first half, though they had done nothing wrong either. Therefore it must have been a dressing-room mystery to solve how they happened to be two-down, as Athletic had scarcely threatened either. However, a top-level board meeting had obviously occurred within the wolves’ lair and the Blues appeared to have reverted to their traditional shape, with the odd tweak: for instance, “Christy” and Mackay changed places; Johnson and “Laxay” pushed forward on either flank; and “Barra” and “Dokus” asserted themselves more into the Stripes’ half.

In 50 minutes Anderson found “Laxay” moving into the Aths’ half on the left touch-line and he sped off on a trademark, stumbling dribble through two defenders and into the left of the box, but a “Koch” interception at the vital moment caused him to mis-time his low-right footer and it trundled harmlessly to the keeper.

A minute later the contest was virtually over. Connor “Fringe” Maciver was freed on the right touch-line by Davis. Eighteen metres from goal he cut in and across the box to his left, then slipped the ball square to Warren Mackay coming towards him. He side-stepped “Tiger” then whipped round to send a low right-footer beyond Craigie and deep into the left-hand corner of his net **(3-0)**.

Further remedial action was required and “Sgweg” replaced Anderson on the hour. Immediately he delivered a free-kick speciality from the right-corner of the Athletic box high across goal, where it was won by Mackay in the centre, 12 metres out, to head down hard and inwards towards the goalie. In the ensuing scramble the keeper reacted first and booted the ball as far out of Goathill as possible. Certainly na Gormaich had moved up a gear while Athletic appeared to have settled for what they had, and shrank back *en masse*, awaiting the sudden chance to break.

In 69 minutes “Taz” found “Laxay” on the left centre-line and he in turn played on the early ball to Harris, running diagonally left. A perfect 1-2 with “Dokus” sent the striker roaring into the box but the keeper was out like lightning to block his shot away, 10 metres from goal.

The accelerator was pressed harder, with Harris withdrawing to right

half/wing; Mackay swapping Makélélé for David Hay, and “Dokus” and Johnson becoming an out-and-out two-pronged attack. It took seven minutes to yield a result, when the break was on into the Athletic half, towards the Carloway right, “Barra” supplying “Sqweg” in front of him. Midway within the half, the midfielder slung over the perfect Martin Peters beyond the retreating line for Domhnall Mackay to ghost in two metres beyond the far post. Six metres out from the bye-line he neatly stabbed a first-touch right-footer diagonally inwards to cross the line beside his near post, before covering defenders and the goalkeeper could close him down (**3-1**).

However, despite their additional possession and territory, the Blues were unable to press home any further advantage and it was the 85th minute before the next clear opportunity manifested itself. “Tiger” won a crunching double tackle at the edge of the Carloway box and burst forward to supply “Barra” racing forward down the right touch-line. He slipped a diagonal forward to “Gochan” on the edge of the box, but his quick return was blocked, only for “Barra”, following up, to attempt an ambitious right-foot hook forward from 16 metres, but it went several metres over.

In the 88th minute, a sudden Athletic break down the right saw Macleod find “Fringe” clear on the right. He made the bye-line and his vicious high cross forced Craigie to race from goal and punch away, under pressure, from 10 metres.

Unexpectedly, in added-on time, Carloway had two opportunities to make the result more respectable. First, “Tiger” found Mackay 20 metres in front of him, and he set up “Sqweg”, on his right, just outside the right side of the Athletic box. His neat cross in turn found Graham Macdonald lurking on the penalty spot. However, pressurised by “Koch”, he could only get his head under it and the ball flew high over. Deep into extra-time, it was “Sqweg” once more who got forward on a “Christy” feed, and as he moved right, he sent in a perfect chip leftwards which cleared the line and fell perfectly for Macdonald, 14 metres out by the far post. He took two steps forward, then practically broke the crossbar with a thunderous left-footer which came down off its underside, bounced once, then was swept clear.

Full-time: Stornoway Athletic 3 (2) Carloway 1 (0)

As far as na Gormaich were concerned, this was the proverbial “*Game of Two Halves*”. They simply did not exist as a cohesive unit in the first half, perhaps due to their unfamiliar strategy, though they might consider themselves unlucky to go in for their half-time oranges two-down. The pace had been largely hum-drum, with few real incidents, and there is little any side can do to prevent a strike like Gary Macleod’s scorcher, while the second goal was more likely caused by a collective loss of concentration; a “*daft*” goal, in other

words, but all teams lose those now and then.

Yet several rejigs later, at different points in the second half, they gradually asserted a form of control, through greater possession and aggression, but, despite the tinkering, they still lacked a sustained final punch. The arrival of “Sqweg”, slotting into his usual role in midfield within a traditional set-up, certainly energized na Gormaich, but it was telling that the Carloway goal was once more scored by a defender/midfielder.

Stornoway Athletic Man of the Match: Gary Macleod.

Carloway Man of the Match: Cameron “Tiger” Macarthur.