

Coop Cup Semi-Final:

Barra 3 (1) Carloway 2 (1)

Craig Ferguson 45+1 Angus Grant 6, 56

Stephen Davidson 82

James Davidson 90+2

At Lionacleit.

11.15 a.m., Saturday, 25.7.15.

Ref.: Paul Steele.

CARLOWAY:

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Gordon Craigie

Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Norman "Taz" Morrison Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur
Lee Johnson ■ Eachainn Miller ■ Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod Kevin
"Barra" Macneil
Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Angus Grant ■

Subs.used: Chris "Christy" Smith (Lee Johnson) 89.

Subs. not used: David "Lurch" Murray; Joe Armstrong; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod; Gordon "Tago" Macdonald.

Yellow card: Lee Johnson 23; Eachain Miller 52.

Red card: Angus Grant 78.

BARRA:

Manager: Martin Macphee

Roddy Macinnes Stephen "Screech" Davidson Craig Ferguson
D.J.Wilson Michael Davidson James Davidson "Mish"
Ewen "Wowi" Campbell Ally Macinnes ■ "Beggs"
Cailean Macarthur

Subs.used: J.A.Campbell (Roddy Macinnes) 71;

Yellow cards: Michael Davidson 29; James Davidson 78

Red card: Ally Macinnes 78.

After the morale-sapping reverse at Garrabost, Carloway had the opportunity to re-charge their sorely-dented team spirit in a Coop Cup Semi-Final, their second-last chance of Cup glory in a disappointing season. Unfortunately, this involved a 6 a.m. start to head south to Benbecula for a visit to Lionacleit, a location which arouses mixed feelings in the collective Carloway memory, being a scene which has witnessed both towering glory and abject misery. Between the *démise* of hot shots, Southend, in the 2000s and the advent of current *équipe du jour*, lochdar Saints, a trip South was treated lightly, with anything less than decisive victory regarded with ridicule, unless major squad members had opted not to travel. Na Gormaich have regularly experienced the latter in the last decade and left the Southern Isles feeling as if an express train had collided with them. Today's opponents were Barra, unlucky losers to Carloway, 2-4, in last year's HAC Round 1, but their unexpected triumph in Round 1 over Lewis and Harris League leaders, Lochs, had suddenly rendered the prospect of a pleasant day out a bit more questionable.

It was to be hoped the wounds incurred by the awards of the first two goals last

Monday had healed sufficiently and that a positive display would serve as some sort of catharsis, as a full squad hit the road south to Beinn Na Faoghla. Billy Anderson did not travel, while Fraser "FrazMac" Macleod was no longer available, but Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, unavailable for the last two games, returned to partner promising young star, Angus Grant, up front. Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur had served his suspension (dismissed at Leurbost on 19th July for a handball, then an innocuous trip) and returned to support Norman "Taz" Morrison and Ali "Laxay" Macdonald at the back, meaning Chris "Christy" Smith, a stalwart versus Point, sank back to the bench beside David "Lurch" Murray, Joe Armstrong, Stuart "Gochan" Macleod, and Gordon "Tago" Macdonald.

So a final against the Siarachs or Rubhachs, playing later today, beckoned. The Black and Reds won the toss, forcing the Blues to play into a light sou'-westerly (which later disappeared) and a bright sun on what might have been na h-Eileanan an Iar's finest summer's day so far. The early scrapping clearly outlined the challenge facing na Gormaich: a determined, frisky opponent, hungry, fast, direct. An early Barra break on the left (a harbinger of what was to come) cleared the defence high, for Ferguson to meet it by the far post, 12 metres out, but his excellently-executed right-foot reverse-volley flew well-wide of the post.

Off-balance slightly, Carloway still rewarded their fans by surprising the Baraich early: an quick break on the right saw Mackay in the centre in his own half find "Dokus" to his right to flick on to Johnson racing into the Barra half. He in turn played an instant forward low pass inwards in front of Grant, ghosting off his marker on the near side. He made the box, before toe-ending the ball past the advancing Macarthur to his left. The ball crawled goal-wards, hit the inside of the post, and the young striker, following up, was first to the rebound to flick it beyond a despairing defender and inside the far post (**0-1**).

The goal, while welcome, had the wrong effect, galvanizing an already eager opponent to more impressive effort, tying "Laxay", "Taz", and "Tiger" to continuous cover to combat the aggressive Ferguson, Davidson, and Macinnes, as the midfield, once again, struggled to coordinate a solid, creative shape. Orchestrated by Michael Davidson, Barra were gaining a dangerous edge against a malfunctioning opposition, although, in 16 minutes, a straight forward ball from Mackay through the centre to "Dokus" saw the Barra back-line retreat defensively, allowing him to opt for a chip over Macarthur, 10 metres out of goal expecting a shot, but the attempt cleared the bar by a metre. Three minutes later, a foul on "Dokus" on the edge of the box in the centre, saw the same player send a delicate chip over the wall but just outside Macarthur's right-hand post.

In 22 minutes, Barra won a free-kick in exactly the same place at the other end, but James Davidson's carefully flighted free-kick lacked the power to trouble "Van Der Sar". Four minutes later the same player managed to get on the end of a deep cross from Macinnes on the left, 12 metres out, but his far post reverse-header flew a

metre wide. As Carloway struggled to stem an adventurous attack, "Tiger" tracked back perfectly down his left to block a breaking Ferguson, set up yet again by Davidson through the middle, 12 metres out, for a corner. Two minutes later another Barra break down the left saw "Taz" forced to take evasive action around the penalty spot, by heading off for a corner to Craigie's right, ahead of the challenging Ferguson. In 36 minutes a surge through the centre ended with the ball breaking off "Tiger" across the centre for James Davidson, 12 metres out to Craigie's left, but his powerful strike soared wide and high a metre over.

As half-time approached, a difficult Davidson attempt, 20 metres from goal to the Carloway left, caused Craigie to scramble desperately to his left to claw away for a corner. A final free-kick of the half allowed "Wowi", midway within the Carloway half, on Craigie's left, to hoist a perfect right-footer high across goal for an alert Ferguson to beat the line and rush in in front of Craigie to head home strongly from 10 metres (1-1). It was hardly undeserved.

Half-time: Barra 1 Carloway 1

A difficult 45 minutes had provided the Blues with a stunning insight into the quality of the "*beautiful game*" on the Southern Isles, and how it would have been relatively easy for the Lochies to slip up. After a combative start, Carloway had been under pressure for the rest of the half against a side who appeared hungrier, faster, and more direct, making the Blues look pedestrian, ill-organized, and slow to the ball. Na Gormaich had been conspicuously vulnerable down the flanks repeatedly, especially on their right and could well have been buried by half-time. "Taz", "Laxay" and "Tiger" had not had a moment to stand on their heels. Nevertheless, the veterans, Mackay, "Sqweg", and "Dokus" dug deep to open the second half with coordinated aggression, inspiring Miller to move continuously into the *terquartista* area to link with Grant, despite clearly being identified as a major threat and receiving repeated hostile attention.

There was an initial scare for the Blues, when Macinnes sped free once more down the left to 10 metres from the line, then whipped a low square ball across the face of goal. Ferguson took it first-time on the volley 12 metres out beyond the far post, but sent it rocketing skywards. Then, on 49 minutes, a mighty "Sqweg" free-kick from just inside the Barra half on their right was met by Mackay 14 metres out in the centre, but his header cleared the bar by a metre. Four minutes later Mackay and "Sqweg" combined in the centre to allow the latter to send a straight breaker forward for Grant to run on to. From the left edge of Macarthur's goal, he swept the ball low to the keeper's right but the goalie dropped instantly to push the ball away expertly to his right.

In 57 minutes the pair combined much more lethally when from just inside the Barra half, out on Barra's left touch-line, "Sqweg" delivered a perfect Martin Peters-style free-kick for Grant to run across the face of the defence and crash a header high into the centre of the net (1-2).

The Baraich replied instantly, winning a disputed free-kick on the edge of the Carloway box, but Macinnes's attempt hit the wall, then was scrambled away. In 67 minutes yet another mighty "Sqweg" free-kick, this time inside the Barra half on their right, was hoisted high across the Barra goal. Somehow everyone missed the whizzing ball, completely distracting Macarthur, but the ball bounced inches beyond the far post.

In 77 minutes Carloway had another chance to kill the tie, when a "Sqweg" free-kick, midway within the Barra half, was lifted to their left. Mackay left the line to meet it but it was just out of reach, and his strained header from 6 metres hit the side-netting. In 80 minutes a "Dokus" corner on Macarthur's left cleared the central ruck to reach the far post where Miller headed down and inwards, only to be blocked off the line by the near post, for another corner on the right. This time a wicked Johnson corner curled in under the bar at such a pace that Macarthur miscalculated but a surprised "Taz" in the centre behind him could only block-header it upwards and over from two metres.

Then the usual punishment arrived for those who fail to take their chances, as it had happened earlier for Barra in the half. A sudden break down the left saw Macinnes make the line behind the high back-line before sending a low hard square cross across the front of the Blues' goal. Stephen Davidson, arriving 10 metres from goal by the far post, stabbed it inwards and even though "Taz" came across to boot it clear, the Carloway defenders did not protest when the line judge flagged for an equalizer **(2-2)**.

A curious dilemma now confronted both sides: Carloway had lost an attacker; Barra a defender. Do you go for it, or trust to the lottery of the dreaded penalty shoot-out? Remember, there is no extra-time in the Coop, for logistical reasons. The pace definitely slackened, but the shape of the game continued: Carloway pressing; Barra breaking. Then as the penalty lottery loomed, a "Sqweg" forward ball from midway within the Barra half was repulsed. As the midfielder went to return the ball goalwards, Davidson beat him to it and shot the ball straight forward, and as it roared between "Tiger" and "Taz", 10 metres back in their own half, James Davidson zoomed on to it gratefully. "Taz" got a foot in but it broke onwards behind him for Davidson to race in on goal unchallenged and as Craigie rushed out to challenge, sidestep him to his left and finish beautifully from 12 metres **(2-3)**. Ouch! There was simply no way back.

Full-time: Barra 3 (1) Carloway 2 (1)

At its most basic, this game posed the question: how much do you want to win, to reach the Coop Cup Final, and win that Cup? Who appeared to care more? The answer to that seems quite clearly, Barra F.C. After an inconclusive opening, in which, for once, a stroke of luck allowed Angus Grant to give the Blues the lead, na Baraich quickly evinced a much greater hunger for the ball, greater movement off it to receive, and a constant, coordinated pressure forward, swamping a floundering

midfield, who once again took a whole game half to organize themselves into a combative, creative unit. However, major weaknesses continued throughout: the lack of what appeared to be a dedicated marking system, hence the opposition being granted too much space to control, assess, and to create; a poor ratio of success in the one-to-one tackles; wide men too easily rounded to allow dangerous crosses, etc. Then, after veterans, like Mackay, "Sgweg", and "Dokus" dug deep to pull the Blues back into contention and seemingly heading towards victory, over-commitment going forward to kill the tie allowed pacy breaks from a still-eager enemy to punish a tired defence sorely.

Where na Gormaich go from here is difficult to predict. The fall from the heights of 2013, understandable in view of extensive departures and prolonged injuries, mirrors the declines of both Athletic and Back, and is clearly a reflection of the exigencies of island life, though its unprecedented depth makes it difficult to accept. However, it is the overall performance today that was of most concern. A disjointed lacklustre first half suggested, not a fun day out, an exciting jaunt south to show off personal talent, but a bunch of workmen forced to work on a day off, with some looking out of sorts in a dire opening 45 minutes.

Nevertheless, an edge of sorts was established in the second half by the above veterans, backed by tireless defensive work from "Taz", "Tiger" and Laxay", and fearless running from Grant and Miller, the latter clearly identified as a major danger, hence aggressive tackling, by the Barra boys,. A sudden raft of chances materialized, were squandered, and then the final nightmare descended. A collective visit to the G.P., even a sports psychologist - or, perhaps, the Daily Record's astrologer - looms on the horizon.

Barra Man of the Match: Michael Davidson.

Carlway Man of the Match: Domhnall Mackay.