

ABC Cup Round 1:

Stornoway United 0 (0) Carloway 4 (3)

Kevin "Barra" Macneil 4, 60 (pen.)

Archie MacDonald 9

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 26

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Wednesday, 13th April, 2016.

Referee: Willie "Mashie" Macleod.

Far-side line judge: Iain Morrison (United) / Alasdair "Tiger" Macarthur

Near-side line judge: Neil Macritchie.

CARLOWAY.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Asst. Managers: Kenny "Noley" MacIennan; Gus Maciver.

Gordon Craigie

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Donald "D.I." MacIennan Ali "Laxay" Macdonald

Jake Allan Dan Crossley Eachainn Miller Archie "Statto" MacDonald

Kevin "Barra" Macneil Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Subs. used: Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod (Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 71; Josh Harris (Dan Crossley) 75; Ross "Tiny" Maclean (Gordon Craigie) 81; Chris "Christy" Smith (Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur) 81; Joe Armstrong (Ali "Laxay" Macdonald) 81.

Yellow card: Donald "D.I." MacIennan 90+1

The temperature plummets; a freezing cold wind whistles through the valley. Yes, convincing proof that the Lewis and Harris football season is about to begin. Last Friday, Goathill resembled a sphagnum peat bog in the west of Ireland - Mayo, perhaps - and after further postponement of the tie on Monday, the Wasps felt obliged to switch their opening encounter of 2016 west to Carloway. *"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"*. Surprisingly, the two sides only clashed twice last year, in the League of course, na Gormaich winning in Stornoway in June, thanks to two Ross MacIver strikes, the first in 81 seconds off a sublime "Sqweg" de Boer, but then tumbling to a 1-2 reverse at Cnoc a' Choilich in August - a defeat more important than it first appears as Carloway at that point were involved in a three-way dogfight with both Stornoway sides to avoid second-bottom position in the League. How the mighty had fallen: the 2013 and 2012 Champions fighting it out to avoid finishing just above wooden spooners Back, the 2011 Champions!

So, a new season, new challenges for both sides. It's always interesting to see United at the beginning of each new season, to spot whatever new talent they will be bleeding in the following few months. The Blues were missing Norman "Taz" Morrison (on a course in St. Andrew's) and Jack Buchanan (at sea), but welcomed back, after season-long absences, defensive stalwart, Donald "D.I." MacIennan, in bone-crushing Goikoetxea form, and their own N'Golo Kanté in Dan Crossley, partnering hot new star, Eachainn Miller, in the central engine room. Flanked by former great, Archie "Statto" Macdonald on the left and new arrival, Jake Allan, on the right, the midfield looked formidable in what mainly performed as a 4-4-2 formation as Ali "Laxay"

Macdonald slipped back behind "Uibhisteach"; at other points, a loose 3-5-1-1.

United kicked off with the advantage, if it could be called that, of a powerful easterly behind them, though with the low evening sun in their eyes. However, they were not allowed any time to settle as Carloway hit the ground running, seizing an immediate initiative in the centre as Miller, Crossley, and the frequently retreating "Dokus" combined well to supply Allan and "Statto" right and left to spread Macmillan and co. It bore early results. A scramble in the centre circle saw Miller win the ball, find Crossley, who then supplied "Dokus" moving rightwards into the Wasps' half. He checked, reversed left, then sent the sweetest of diagonals left through the line. "Statto" was on to it in a flash, drew the back, then swept past him towards the bye-line, before whipping across a wicked, low cross, ten metres from the line. The arriving "Barra" had the easiest of tasks by the far post to beat Allan to the ball and steer the ball home past a helpless "Gordie" Mackenzie, deputizing for the suspended Jack MacLennan (**1-0**).

Five minutes passed and a mirror image of the first goal arrived, down the right this time. Crossley tussled with Flower(?) in the centre circle to supply Miller who moved rapidly into the United half, then from 25 metres sent a dream Charlie Gallagher rightwards behind the back for the breaking "Dokus" to race to 10 metres from the line before squaring low across the face of the goal for MacDonald to speed in on the left and convert (**2-0**)

United were struggling to establish a grip in the centre of the field as Crossley and Miller, augmented by "Dokus", fought them off for possession to supply "Barra", Allan, and MacDonald, and this shrank the back line inwards to protect "Gordie", leaving the wings, especially the Carloway right, with open space to exploit. In 15 minutes the ploy worked again, but Allan's cross was too difficult for MacDonald to control by the far post. The resultant "Dokus" corner led to a goalmouth melée, the ball being squeezed out to the Blues' left, allowing "Raymondo" to send a perfect Martin Peters left-footer high over the defence, but "Barra's" reverse header crept past Mackenzie's right-hand post.

Suddenly, in 20 minutes, United broke down the right as Macdonald ghosted behind his namesake on to a perfect Macmillan ball but his cross, 18 metres from the line, was too deep and Craigie snuffed out the danger. Three minutes later another opportunity arrived, when "D.I." chopped Kevin Flower down 20 metres from goal in the centre, but Hamish Macdonald's thunderous strike crashed rightwards off the wall. However, just as the Stornoway men appeared to be creating a presence, bad luck descended on them in their own area. A straightforward pass-back in 26 minutes was sliced leftwards by "Gordie" 12 metres from goal, danced in the swirling wind ever so delicately, before dropping neatly to the feet of "Dokus" 20 metres from goal, and he swung backwards and round to lob the simplest of right-footers over the stranded keeper (**3-0**).

The Wasps didn't collapse: the midfield and centre back remained focussed

and aggressive, but the attack and defensive flanks were negligible. In 31 minutes "Tiger" was sent free on the right and cut the ball back intelligently from 16 metres to Miller in the centre but his low drive was pushed away by "Gordie", low to his left. Eventually, in 35 minutes another chance - or two - arrived for United, when "Preston" was upended in the centre, 28 metres from goal. This time Macdonald calibrated the trigger hairs expertly and Craigie had to throw himself sharply to his left to parry the ball away for a corner. The corner led to an almighty scramble on the Carloway 10-metre line in front of Craigie before the ball broke slightly behind an unfortunate striker, forcing him to stretch backwards to connect, but he only managed in scooping the ball a metre over the bar. The half concluded with two further United free-kicks, the first from 22 metres towards their right, but this time Macdonald lifted the ball high and wide of Craigie's left-hand post, then on 42 minutes yet another free-kick from the United right, 20 metres from the line, forced Craigie to rush to fist clear under pressure.

Half-time: Stornoway United 0 Carloway 3

It's difficult to imagine what the best advice would have been to pass on to the boys from the east at half-time. A whirlwind had hit them before they had found their feet, and even though they had managed to steady the ship to a certain degree, in midfield mainly, they had had little presence in the Carloway half, due mainly to the established experience of the Blues' back-line, expertly led by Domhnall "Terminator" Mackay. Also, the pace of the Blues' breaks on the flanks had been relatively uncontained, although there had been a marked tightening-up on their left.

No problems for na Gormaich, with no real weaknesses, and each apparently playing to their strengths, although there was an instant threat from a long ball out of central defence, clearing the high Blues' back-line, which forced MacDonald to race back to snuff out the danger on the edge of the box. Immediately the ball was supplied forward left to "Laxay" who set off on a trademark, 35-metre run, half-driving, half-stumbling, into the United box, before squeezing a tricky low shot just past "Gordie's" right-hand post from 16 metres.

Opportunities continued to arrive for Carloway. In 50 minutes Miller released Allan on the right but his whipped low cross, 16 metres from the line, was a metre too far for "Statto" to connect by the far post. A minute later the central United defence got into a fankle 22 metres from goal, allowing Crossley to break forward, but "Gordie" was alive to the threat, and rushed out to boot clear on the edge of the box. Then, on the hour, Crossley and "Dokus" combined with "Barra" to allow Miller to break to the right bye-line. Eight metres from goal, he drove the ball inwards against the covering defender. They both tumbled in the challenge. Miller got up smartly and started to step over the fallen defender to catch the ball rolling inwards, but as the United man got to his feet, he brought Miller down. It was all a bit untidy, but the referee immediately pointed to the spot. All rather weak, on a par with the penalties at Old Trafford, Man. Utd. used to get under Sir Alex, but you don't turn them down. "Barra" made an excellent job of the award, tucking it low

into Mackenzie's right-hand corner (4-0).

Three minutes later Miller once more broke forward, this time through the centre, then sent a peach of a Jimmy McIlroy between central defender and left-back for Allan to race on to but the advancing goalkeeper managed to put the striker off and the ball ran harmlessly for a goal-kick. In 72 minutes a "Sqweg" free-kick from just inside the United half, to the right, cleared everyone but Allan's stab from 12 metres on the left shot across goal and past "Gordie's" left-hand post. Three minutes later the goalie had to look sharp, down fast to his left, as a "Sqweg" corner from the Carloway right led to a fracas in front of goal, before being whipped back in low from his right by "Laxay".

United were wobbling badly as MacDonald broke a minute later down their left, checked and cut in 16 metres from goal, but was blocked in the area. He played the rebound back to "Barra" on the right edge of the box, but he pulled his daisy-cutter past the United right-hand post. In 84 minutes came the final two "moments" of the game, as a sustained Blues' push on their left involving "D.I.", "Laxay", and Crossley, drove them into the box before "Raymondo" slipped the ball inwards towards "Barra", but the striker had over-anticipated, and had to stretch to connect, and somehow lifted the ball over the bar from the 6-metre line. A minute later "Gordie" had to produce another daring stop, 10 metres from goal, at the feet of Harris, sent through on the left by "Sqweg".

Full-time: Stornoway United 0 (0) Carloway 4 (3)

This was a rewarding evening for the Blues: perhaps not inspired, but workmanlike, efficient, with an absence of any obvious glitches. Granted, United didn't really test them. Being 2-down after 9 minutes hardly helped the Wasps to mount a significant challenge, although as the ninety minutes progressed, they did establish a dogged presence moving into the centre of the Carloway half, with imaginative talent obvious in the play of Robinson, especially, and a definite tightening up on the defensive flanks, but na Gormaich's high back-line generally snuffed out danger outside the Blues' area, and "Van Der Sar" only really had two testing moments.

Na Gormaich's midfield were generally untroubled by the unarmed combat that gains central control in modern football, creating plenty of time for themselves to mount imaginative passing movements forward, and ceaselessly exploiting the wings. This was something the United boys did not attempt, their main attacking focus being through the middle, which was unfortunate as it was here that the Carloway defence - with "Tiger", DM, and "D.I." - was strongest.

Overall, the Carloway squad looked ready for the 2016 challenge: a strong bench, despite the absence of "Taz" and "JackFlash"; and the returnees performing without mishap. Dan Crossley combined well with Miller, and demonstrated enough of his old talent to encourage the fans that more was to come; and "D.I." plunged straight back into his customary Trevor Hockey best to ward off any threat, acquiring his customary yellow card in the process.

Stornoway United Man of the Match: Lewis “Preston” Robinson.
Carloway Man of the Match: Eachainn Miller.