

ABC Cup Semi Final:

## **Carloway 3 (2) Ness 1 (0)**

Ross Maciver 30

Innes Smith 90+6

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 40

Archie "Statto" MacDonald 52

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Monday, 18.4.14.

Referee: Calum "Chancey" Macleod.

CARLOWAY.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Asst. Managers: Kenny "Noley" MacLennan, Gus Maciver.

Gordon Craigie

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

Kevin "Barra" Macneil Dan Crossley Eachain Miller Archie "Statto" MacDonald

Ross Maciver Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Subs. used: Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod (Eachainn Miller) 80; Josh Harris (Ross Maciver) 84;

Chris "Christy" Smith (Josh Harris) 90; Joe Armstrong (Dan Crossley) 90+4

Sub. not used: Ross "Tiny" Maclean.

Almost a year to the day had passed since Carloway and Ness last faced each other in an ABC Cup Semi-Final - at Fivepenny last April when a Craig Harris penalty cancelled out a Jack Buchanan opener. This led into a 6th straight penalty shoot-out success (4-1) for the Blues, which sent them into their third successive ABC Cup Final. Unfortunately, that's where na Gormaich's good fortune in the ABC ended (they had also beaten Point by the same method, 4-2, in Round 1), as a David Macmillan free-kick in the 91st minute took the Cup to Leurbost, 1-2.

Having never reached an ABC Cup Final at all in their history till their *annus mirabilis*, 2013, they have featured in the last three, their first, and only success, 6-0 over Back, in that year, being followed in 2014 by a 0-5 mauling by west coast rivals, Westside, at Garrabost, then 1-2 to Lochs last season.

The Blues' Cup progress to this tie had been straightforward, efficient even - 4-0 versus United last Wednesday at Cnoc a' Choilich; the Niseachs' Round 1 victory was slightly more dramatic, a last-minute equalizer propelling them onwards to shoot-out success against the holders and current League Champions, Lochs. So an adversary to be respected - but when have the Niseachs been regarded any differently?

The passing year has seen the Blues' formation and line-up change, by choice and circumstance: 3-5-2 has become 4-4-2; Phil Macleod and Jack Buchanan were unavailable (both at sea), and young star, Josh Harris, plagued by injury, was only risked on the bench, alongside Ross "Tiny" Maclean, Chris "Christy" Smith, Joe Armstrong, and Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod. There was also no show for Kyle Brunton or Billy Anderson, while Lee Johnson nursed a shoulder injury, and Norman "Taz" Morrison continued at his course in St. Andrew's. Unfortunately, Jake Allan, who made his debut

versus United, could not appear but emerging star, Ross Maciver, returned, to the right of ace goal-maker and - scorer, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald. At the 2015 meeting, na Gormaich were ecstatic to note the absence of star performers, James "Titch" Morrison, Micheil Russell-Smith, and Andrew "Bubble" Macleod. No such luck tonight: all were present, along with every other Morrison in the Ness area, plus Jack Dunlop, Innes Smith, et al. The old description of Serie A football was that the most talented individuals in the world appeared there, yet behind their skill-sets, there lurked an underlying, ready brutality to deal with its appearance in any of the opposition. This juxtaposition - artistry paired with brutality - was much in evidence tonight.

The temperature may still have been Arctic but, thankfully, last Wednesday's wind had dissipated and a beautiful late spring evening greeted the diehards as they witnessed what at times seemed like a re-enactment of the Battle of Sheriffmuir on George Spay's expertly-cut Cnoc a' Choilich. Aware of the assertiveness of the Niseach midfield, the Blues recognized centre-circle control was paramount and Eachainn Miller and Dan Crossley immediately tried to rein the initiative from Micheil Russell-Smith - with mixed success - as their largely irrepressible foe had the same object in mind. With "Bubble" operating mainly in a Geoff Hurst role, deep, through inside-right, Russell-Smith combatted hard, then gravitated left, then forward and in, to support his front-line. Battle lines were so well matched that it was 15 minutes before a realistic chance arrived, when a sharply-driven Ness free-kick, 20 metres from the bye-line on their right, was scrambled clear on the Blues' penalty spot.

Moments later, Crossley won the ball under heavy pressure in the centre circle, then set off on a trademark run through and round opponents into the left of the Niseach box, but "Sweeney" anticipated expertly to race from goal and block the final shot with his right foot, 10 metres from the right of his goal. Two minutes later a "Barra" corner on the Carloway left came high under the bar and might have sneaked home if the keeper had again not been adequately alert to punch clear on his right for a second corner. The second corner came in low but was booted clear. Russell-Smith managed to wrest control of the breaking ball from Miller, 22 metres out facing his own goal, turn, then emulate Crossley by rampaging off on his own mazy run, leftwards into the Carloway half. Midway within the Blues' half he checked inwards, then flicked the sweetest of line-breakers leftwards and behind Mackay but inside Maclennan for "Bubble" to drive into the right of the Blues' box. However, his venomous daisy-cutter cut across Craigie and just outside the far post. Two minutes later a Russell-Smith whack on Eachain Miller, just outside the box centrally, led to a "Dokus" free-kick clearing the right-hand side of "Sweeney's" bar by a metre.

Approaching the half-hour, a disputed free-kick on the Carloway right, James Morrison adjudged to have tripped Ross Macliver, 18 metres from the line, resulted in a "Dokus" right-footer winging its way behind the line and across "Sweeney's" goal but just too high for the arriving MacDonald. Moments later, the opener arrived - and what a gem it was! Another centre-circle battle saw Crossley win the ball, then slip it forward to Miller, who broke square right,

then sent a sublime Johnny Giles rightwards between the Morrisons for Maciver to coast on to and into the box, before sending an early right-footer past the approaching keeper's right (**1-0**).

As na Gormaich gradually began to impose themselves on a combative Ness midfield, a Mackay free-kick in 35 minutes from the halfway skidded backwards off Neil Morrison's head and "Sweeney" had to react instantly to push away a possible own goal, low by his left-hand post. "Barra" got to the loose ball first, then cut a low diagonal back in to Miller, 16 metres from goal, on the right-side of the box, but he pulled his right-foot daisy-cutter beyond the far post.

However, two minutes later, the Niseachs should have levelled. Yet another Russell-Smith run was ended illegally 22 metres from Craigie in the centre. The resultant Dunlop free-kick thudded against the wall, then bounced through it, and an unmarked "Titch" whipped the ball at goal sharply from 12 metres, but somehow managed to send it a foot outside "Van Der Sar's" left-hand post.

It proved costly minutes later when a concerted Niseach attack down their left was blocked midway within the Blues' half. Crossley won the dogfight for possession, then steamed off down the right like Usain Bolt, whacking the ball straight past Morrison on the centre line and racing around him. Pace took him deep down the Ness right and from 22 metres he sent the early ball, low and square across goal, for "Dokus", to race in unhindered behind an isolated Neil Morrison, one-touch control it with his left, then stab a powerful, right jab past the helpless "Sweeney's" left. Classic oversight and opportunism from Crossley, expertly capped by "Dokus"! (**2-0**).

On the whistle "Titch" almost reduced the deficit when he emulated Russell-Smith with a breaking run from the centre circle which took him rightwards through the line, but "Barra" somehow managed to retreat in time to deliver a saving tackle, just inside the left of the Carloway box.

**Half-time: Carloway 2 Ness 0**

It had been an entertaining 45 minutes, evincing all that is attractive about island football. The fact that three of the finest artistes in Lewis - Crossley, Miller, and Russell-Smith - were on Cnoc a' Choilich undoubtedly helped, though the contributions from others - "Dokus", "Titch", MacDonald, Smith, "Barra", etc. - cannot be overlooked, plus the pleasant conditions. No one had been posted missing. Na Gormaich had certainly edged the centre-circle battle in the first 45. Whether or not they deserved to be two ahead is debatable - though the two strikes had been stunning, both in inventiveness and execution.

It's difficult to imagine what either manager could have advised to make things better. More of the same soon followed as yet another Crossley tackle and charge sent "Barra" on the right from midway within his own half sent "Barra" on the right towards the Ness box. His sharp square cut to "Dokus" found the striker falling backwards but his half-hit right-footer from 10 metres

would still have crept home if “Sweeney” had not made a brilliant foot-block, low to his left. Moments later, as players argued over the award, a Blues’ free-kick in the centre, midway within the Ness half was stabbed forward immediately by “Dokus” to an unmarked Crossley, on the edge of the box. Amazingly, the flag stayed down but “Sweeney” reacted just as fast as the Carloway man to grapple with Crossley and somehow wrestle control of the ball from him.

However, three minutes later the rubber was dead. A war of attrition on the Carloway right, just inside the Niseach half, was won by “Tiger”, who immediately sped forward and swept a low ball across goal, 10 metres out. MacDonald just managed to fight off Morrison to squeeze the pass low inside “Sweeney’s” left-hand post (**3-0**).

It had been a wayward opening 7-8 minutes for the Ness defence, as if they were mentally still in the dressing-room, but now they woke up, tightened the line, and a new push from midfield attempted to salvage some hope in the tie. A ball from midfield deep into the Carloway area led to a penalty-spot melée, the ball breaking left, then chipped back in for Dunlop to connect 10 metres from goal, but Craigie was untroubled by his glancing header. Nevertheless, the passing minutes forced Russell-Smith to try his luck from a 30-metre free-kick in the centre on 67 minutes. He struck it well to dip over the wall to Craigie’s left but the veteran read it well to push it away for a corner.

However, the main battle line had returned to the centre, as Crossley and Miller imposed themselves on an outnumbered Ness *animateur*, Russell-Smith. Also, the latter’s options for forward supply were further constrained by the departure of “Titch” in 74 minutes, the Niseach having received sustained “*personal*” attention from “Tiger”, “D.I.”, and Mackay. “Bubble” was also quiet, after being flattened by “D.I.” early in the second half.

In 82 minutes yet another Russell-Smith free-kick, from 40 metres this time, again hit the target, low to Craigie’s right. “Van Der Sar” couldn’t hold the nasty dipping ball, but the arriving Colin Morrison fired the rebound over the bar from 10 metres. A minute later a Calum Vann strike from 20 metres, towards the Ness right, forced Craigie to claw the ball away to his right for a corner. The corner came in high and was glanced on at the near post, across goal. However, “Laxay”, guarding the Blues’ left-hand post, managed to boot the attempt away with his right foot.

Two quick Carloway breaks were to follow, a “Barra” header from 12 metres creeping over, before Crossley won the ball on the left but an advancing “Sweeney” managed to block his snap drive between his legs. Then just as “Chancey” was searching for his whistle, another lofted ball into the Carloway area led to a quick Ness interchange to Innes Smith, who turned to lift the ball into Craigie’s left-hand net from 10 metres (**3-1**).

**Full-time: Carloway 3 (2) Ness 1 (0)**

A hard-won victory for the Blues tonight against a dogged, implacable foe

who, no doubt, feel aggrieved with Lady Fortune for granting them no reward for their efforts and for the damage to their squad. It was an interesting demonstration of the efficacy of na Gormaich's switch to a back four, which held strong - what else would you expect from a "Tiger"-Mackay-"D.I." wall? - especially throughout a sustained Niseach assault late in the game. In addition the power and commitment of "Statto" in left midfield allowed "Laxay" to complement the line, then move forward frequently to augment the attack.

Ness's main problems were in central defence, handling "Dokus", Maciver, and "Barra", but this was due to events in the centre of the field. Russell-Smith's commitment was immense; marking, tackling, and creating chance after chance, but he had a one against two personal battle to conduct versus Crossley and Miller who, at times, seemed to combine symbiotically and repeatedly free "Barra" and Maciver on the right, and support the dangerous "Dokus" through the centre. Russell-Smith and Crossley are endowed with that rare quality, when in possession, once exemplified every week at Col Uarach by Murray Macleod, where the ball seems to glue itself to their feet, making it nigh on impossible for an opponent to win it off them. James "Titch" Morrison has a touch of that, as does "Bubble" normally but he contributed less than usual tonight. Was he fit? Or was it the heavy marking/tackling that took its toll?

From a Carloway point of view, tonight was a job well-done: everyone wanted the ball; everyone contributed; everyone played the part they had been assigned, some more than others (Dan Crossley, Eachain Miller, and "Dokus"), in a physically draining contest, in which several still fought to display moments, indeed periods, of outstanding creativity and finishing. What would have happened in 2014 at the I.C.T. Stadium in Inverness if Dan Crossley had not been injured before the interval? It doesn't bear thinking about. Never mind. The past is gone. In the future even bigger tests approach - this week, for instance - with two contests against what increasingly looks like the team *du jour*, Westside.

**Carloway Man of the Match: Dan Crossley.**

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