

Lewis and Harris League:

Westside 2 (1) Carloway 1 (1)

Luke Mackay 40

Scott Graham o.g. 8

Martainn Shields 68

At Barvas.

Monday, 25.4.14.

Referee: D J Maclean (Bragar).

Line judges: Neil Macritchie, Alasdair "Tiger" Macarthur (Carloway)

CARLOWAY: 4-4-2

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

Kevin "Barra" Macneil Dan Crossley Eachain Miller Archie "Statto" MacDonald
Ross Maciver Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Subs. used: Jake Allan (Ross Maciver) 67; Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod (Archie "Statto"
MacDonald) 80

Subs. not used: Ross "Tiny" Maclean; Chris "Christy" Smith; Josh Harris.

Yellow cards: Donald "D.I." MacIennan 26; Kevin "Barra" Macneil 44

WESTSIDE: 4-5-1.

Manager: Murchadh Macdonald.

Luke Mackay

Martainn Shields Scott Graham Innes Iain Morrison Colin George Morrison Ali
"Barvas" Macleod ■

Duncan Maclean Johnnie Wallace Donnie "Noe" Smith Gordon Campbell
Iain Gillies

Subs. used: Warren Mackay (Colin George Morrison) 74.

Yellow card: Ali "Barvas" Macleod 75.

Carloway's much-delayed opening League fixture finally took place this evening at Lower Barvas, hardly a "*Field of Dreams*" for the Blues, despite being the setting for one of their greatest, and most important, victories. It was here, of course, in August 2013 that they recorded their most memorable League triumph, 3-1, to clinch their first, and only, Championship, thanks to second-half goals from Seumas Macleod (flown from Glasgow specially for that evening) and an Exocet clincher from Frazmac in the 84th minute.

Surprisingly, only seven Blues' players from that tie appeared tonight: "D.I.", "Dokus", "Tiger", "Sqweg", Dan Crossley, and "Barra", while Gordon Craigie appeared between the sticks for the opposition! Likewise, only six Siarachs from that eventful night started this evening: Gordon Campbell, Donnie "Noe", Duncan Maclean, Martainn Shields, Colin George Morrison, and Scott Graham. Ah well, the sands of time are ever changing. The two Macleod goal-scorers are now off island; force of nature, Ally Williamson, has retired, while class *animateur*, Dan Macphail, was absent. Emerging talent, like Eachainn Miller, Ross Maciver, and Luke Mackay, in conjunction with

established ball-players like Dan Crossley, Innes Iain Morrison, and Ali "Barvas" Macleod have a few gaps to fill.

Since that night, however, Barvas has not been high on na Gormaich's bucket list - more likely, a front-runner in a '*One of those Places Best Avoided*' competition, just ahead of Goathill. A 0-4 mauling was inflicted the following season, West's Championship-winning year, and last year the Blues recorded a semi-respectable 2-4 League loss, "Sqweg" and "Dokus" making the score-sheet. Early exits from most Cups meant there was only one other meeting between the west side's best in 2015, the occasion being another evening of abject misery for the Blues at Cnoc a' Choilich in May, Innes Iain Morrison, Jamie Sullivan, and Martainn Shields piling on the heartache.

So, lots to think about - or forget - tonight for the Blues. However, two competent displays, against United and Ness, which featured outstanding performances from Miller, Crossley, and "Dokus", plus rock-hard defensive work from the back-line of "Tiger", Mackay, "D.I.", and "Laxay", fuelled optimism for a positive outcome and led to an identical starting line-up to last Friday night's. Also, Jake Allan was again available, and joined the bench, beside Ross "Tiny" Maclean, Chris "Christy" Smith, Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod, and a recovered Josh Harris. However, they confronted a Siarach eleven celebrating three successive opening victories: in the ABC Cup, 3-0 at Back and 4-1 at home to Point, last year's Championship runners-up; and 4-1 victors on Saturday in Lionacleit over Barra, the current holders of the Coop Cup.

Tonight's fixture could be viewed as a full-dress rehearsal for a more important event, the ABC Cup Final on Friday at Goathill, between these sides. Hopefully, tonight's unwelcome guest at the party will not be around on Friday in Stornoway: a howling Siberian northerly which did its best to frustrate any attempt at careful build-ups or delicate balls more than one metre above ground. Any spectator without thermals on most likely ended up in A.& E. Westside had the misfortune to face into the gale in the first half but the strength of the wind, plus its twisting direction diagonally from corner flag to corner flag, made it difficult for Carloway to use effectively, although an initial stroke of good fortune led them to believe otherwise.

From the whistle, the battle for midfield supremacy erupted: Miller and Crossley in immediate savage conflict with the Morrisons and Graham for that crucial area in the centre. An early free-kick for na Gormaich in the centre circle was lofted high straight forward by Mackay towards Ian Gillies. The wind carried it forward like a bullet and as everyone retreated to meet the plummeting ball, Scott Graham had the bad luck to mistime a clearing header so that the ball shot backwards off the top of his head from 10 metres and entered West's right-hand net, shoulder-high, like a rocket. If there had been no goal net, the ball would probably have ended up in Broadbay (0-1).

Four minutes later Duncan Maclean had a chance to emulate the Blues' captain from roughly the same spot but his free-kick was against the wind, which caused his high free-kick to descend rapidly about 10 metres from

goal. Craigie managed to punch clear under pressure to his right where Shields lurked, 16 metres out on the Siarach left, but his snap drive flew a metre over the bar. On 19 minutes West again broke through the centre, the Morrisons combining well to supply "Barvas" square and spreading wide to the right. As "Laxay" approached, 20 metres from the bye-line, he slipped the early ball forward ahead of Mackay, rushing into the right of the Carloway box. However, Craigie read the pass and pipped the striker to the ball. Nevertheless, the general drift of the game was toward Gillies because of the windswept conditions and the central battleground retreated 10 metres into the Siarach half.

In 23 minutes a Crossley free-kick on the Carloway left, midway within Westside's half, had to be headed on and away by a desperate Smith, 14 metres in front of goal. This resulted in two "Dokus" corners from the Blues' right, the second using the driving wind perfectly and forcing Gillies to carefully punch the ball over from under his own bar. Two minutes later "Dokus" trickery on the left edge of the Siarach box gave him space to sweep a low cross across goal but Campbell brilliantly intercepted to block MacDonald's attempt, 12 metres out by Gillies's right-hand post.

In 28 minutes a "Tiger" trip on Shields, 22 metres from the bye-line on the Siarach left, allowed Maclean to swing in a dangerous head-high diagonal which Mackay did well to win and head for a corner. The subsequent corner led to an almighty scramble around the Carloway box, as both Morrisons, Mackay, and Shields all had attempted conversions blocked, before "D.I" booted the ball the length of the park.

The wind continued to play tricks on the players. A superb Miller diagonal from the centre circle, between Wallace and Maclean, freed "Barra" on the right. He checked 16 metres from the line and tried to cut the ball across but the ball was blocked and thwacked downfield. However, the wind caught the clearance and pushed the ball upwards, back and across to "Dokus" on the near side of the box. He immediately turned, 20 metres out, and whipped a nasty right-footer to Gillies's right but it crept a metre past the far post. Two minutes later a Crossley short corner on the Carloway right to MacDonald ended with the Uibhisteach flashing a sharp low ball across goal. "Dokus", standing in the centre on the line of the box, swivelled back and turned to hook the ball forward, but, again, he was a metre out, this time over West's right-side bar.

As half-time approached, na Gormaich now were punished for these missed half-chances when Morrison fed "Ostrich" on the right. The attempted cross across goal, 18 metres from the line, was blocked outwards, then played back in. Several blocked clearances caused the ball to ricochet eventually to Colin George Morrison on the edge of the box. He instantly slipped it left to Mackay, who immediately cracked a low right-footer deep into the corner of Craigie's right-hand net (1-1).

Half-time: Westside 1 Carloway 1

It had been an extremely unedifying 45 minutes, for players and spectators alike, in freezing conditions, with meaningful, cohesive play disrupted hugely by an unrelenting wind. At half-time the fans probably cleaned out the tea and pie stall in 90 seconds. Any imaginative ball-play - by the likes of the Morrisons, "Barvas", Miller, or Crossley - was drastically curtailed, the parting ball, unless weighted, low, and precise, a gift to fortune. The main item of interest, after the switch round, was which side would harness the elements more effectively. Calloway had edged the chances so far, such as there were, but had not capitalized. The old cliché, "*If you don't take your chances* ——" sprang to mind.

Immediately, the brutal contest for midfield supremacy was re-ignited. In 52 minutes, Carloway had another unexpected opportunity to put clear space between themselves and West when Miller won the ball in the centre circle, turned right, then delivered a sublime diagonal behind Maclean for Maciver to ghost forward unchecked into the Siarach box. As Gillies narrowed the angle, the young star steered the ball neatly to his right from 16 metres; a carbon copy of his strike past "Sweeney" last Friday. However, it was slightly underhit and a chasing Campbell, coming across from West's right, somehow managed to catch it inside the far post and whip it away off the line. Two minutes later a Maclean free-kick, 22 metres out in the centre, was headed away by Mackay, only to be met by Campbell, 20 metres from goal to the right of the Blues' box, but he pulled his shot low and wide of Craigie's left-hand post.

In 57 minutes Ali "Barvas" finally showed his class to gather the ball on the right behind MacDonald, draw "Laxay", then cut inside and across, midway within the Carloway half, before delivering a classic Pat Crerand, an unexpected low right-footer straight forward between "D.I." and "Laxay" for Mackay to turn to his right on to behind the line and move in unhindered. "Van Der Sar" was out like a flash and somehow managed to block the low thwack from 16 metres. The ball spun high and back to the young star but the arriving pack hustled him into skying the rebound as far as the Castle Grounds. The Siarachs were now turning the screw. With Crossley only a shadow of the player he had been versus Ness (he had been unwell at the interval), Miller was outnumbered, as Innes Iain asserted himself in that vital central area, Colin George surged to his right in support, and Graham held. With Shields and "Barvas" keeping wide, "Barra" and "Statto" lay deeper to support "Tiger" and "Laxay". Consequently, "Dokus" and Maciver were more isolated. The back-line remained Gneissian, however.

A minute later a Shields free-kick, midway within the Blues' half, to the left, whacked against, then through, the wall but flew a couple of metres outside Craigie's left-hand post. In 64 minutes yet another free-kick, this time from Maclean, on the West right, 18 metres from the line, led to an almighty melée in the Carloway box, the ball eventually breaking out to "Barvas" in the centre but his low drive from 30 metres went straight to Craigie.

Inevitably, the breakthrough arrived, but through an individual piece of quick-thinking expertise from Shields. A long ball out of defence whizzed down the

West left, chased by “Tiger” and Shields. Craigie came, hesitated, then moved back. Shields outpaced the defender, then spotting the keeper off his line, sent the sweetest of left-foot lobs over his head from the left edge of the box. Craigie could only watch helplessly as the ball bounced into the unguarded net (2-1).

In 71 minutes a Maclean free-kick, midway within na Gormaich’s half, struck a head in the wall and spun a metre over the centre of the bar. Carloway continued to struggle to restart the machine, as a speculative strike from 24 metres by Graham (?) was blocked low by “Van Der Sar” to his left, and as Mackay raced in, he did well to block his drive from 14 metres.

The arrival of “Sqweg” in 80 minutes brought some degree of stability and purpose to the Blues, supporting Miller, mainly to his right, but not before more “Barvas” trickery on the right gave him space to move off “Laxay” on the right and send in a low hard strike from 20 metres which Craigie held carefully, low to his left. Two minutes later a “Sqweg” free-kick on the right touch-line, midway within the Siarach half, swirled invitingly across the face of goal, but without takers.

Na Gormaich were certainly re-engaged in the final ten minutes, re-discovering their sense of purpose, but were simply unable to line up Gillies in their sights, as Campbell, Smith, Wallace, and Maclean repelled each advance. Indeed, the final real chance of the evening came in the final minute as a long ball to the left of centre sent Shields clear once again racing into the Carloway half, allowing him to flight a perfect early Tigana for Mackay to run on to in the centre but once again Craigie made himself big and blocked one-on-one from 18 metres.

Full-time: Westside 2 (1) Carloway 1 (1)

As a pointer to Friday’s Cup outcome, tonight was of little significance, even if the gale decides to turn up at Goathill. Much of the night was not conducive to any demonstrations of excellence, and so much time was spent retrieving a ball which had whizzed off on to the surrounding moors. What was evident was the rampant motivation and commitment of all concerned to establish their team’s ascendancy in the west - or simply to stay warm. No one was missing; everyone wanted the ball. Each back-line was resilient, faultless even, in an extremely testing environment, crushing most assaults outwards, to a safe distance. Hence, Gillies and Craigie (in the first half) were hardly overworked, just attentive.

However, conditions gave both sides scarce opportunity to exhibit their positive attributes and begs the question: games at all levels are regularly called off because of snow, ice, water, and fog or mist, but never wind. Why not? In a country like Scotland, more so, in places like Lewis, the influence of the wind is a frequent feature. Is there not a level at which its influence is detrimental, like tonight? Anyway, in a strict roster of chances created, Westside had it tonight. Apart from Maciver’s effort, all Carloway’s came in the first half, and none were as clear-cut as those created by the Siarachs in

the second. While the Blues' goal was simply good luck, Westside's resulted from two spontaneous moments of insightful opportunism, and skill of course. Not that such skills were absent at other times or not demonstrated by others on the park.

The hectic nature of the gladiatorial competition for the centre meant that the *animateurs* spent most of the time in personal combat with each other for possession which precluded any great exhibitions of talent, though it was glaringly evident at times: Eachain Miller's killer diagonals could open up the smartest of defences, while "Dokus"s career-long *raumdeuter* ability to open up space for himself before delivering the pass or shot has not waned; likewise, Innes Iain is clearly developing into an all-round *trequartista* in the Wesley Sneijder mould, while the mercurial "Barvas" remains an unpredictable handful for any opposition. With a bit of luck, or a smile from Lady Fortune, maybe the players will get a chance to display these talents on Friday. If so, the verdict remains open on the result.

Westside Man of the match: Innes Iain Morrison.

Carlway Man of the Match: Domhnall Mackay.