

Lewis and Harris League :

Lochs 2 (1) Carloway 0 (0)

David Macritchie 37

David Macmillan 53

At Creagan Dubh, Leurbost.

Monday, 29.8.16, 18.30.

Referee: Kenneth "Bugsy" Smith.

Lochs line judge: Calum Murdo Mackenzie.

Carloway line judge: Andrew Macleod.

CARLOWAY: 4-4-1-1.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

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

Gordon Craigie

Ben Smith Donald "D.I." MacIennan Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Joe Armstrong

Callum "Beag" Mackay Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Andrew "Tago" Maciver Archie "Statto" MacDonald

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Jake Allan

Subs. used: Donald "Rab" Maciver (Jake Allan) 62; Euan Gilmour (Andrew "Tago" Maciver) 86; Jake Macleod (Archie "Statto" MacDonald) 90+2.

LOCHS.

Manager: David Macmillan.

Jim O'Donnell Craig Maclean

David Macritchie David Macmillan John "Uig" Morrison Robert Mackenzie

Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie ■ Donald "Nomie" Macdonald Peter Mackenzie (capt.) Neil Houston

James Macleod

Subs. used: Steven Price (Craig Maclean) 68; No. 14 (Jim O'Donnell) 90+2.

Yellow card: Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie (dangerous play) 84.

And so the final week of Season 2016 was upon us (where did it all go, you might ask?), and the third last game of the season. Unlike Friday's slumberfest versus United, however, there was all to play for tonight - for both sides - though more so for the hosts. The priorities for Carloway, no doubt, were the avoidance of injury and if they were to lose, at least not to endure an absolute mauling, to keep group morale high for the Final on Saturday. Lochs' aims were much more defined: although defeat would not end their League ambitions, it would mean victory at Garrabost on Wednesday was essential, not simply preferred, in order to earn a dreaded play-off with the Rubhachs. Also, like the Blues, any substantial injuries or decisive defeat tonight would obviously be unhelpful.

Carloway had been the guests here just over a fortnight earlier - or, at least, a version of them, deservedly winning 4-2 in the EaF Cup Final, but tonight it was the full-strength Leurbost side they confronted, a significantly more intimidating outfit than that on the 12th, even more so considering that one of the Blues' outstanding performers that evening, John "Uig" Morrison, would tonight be back in his customary maroon.

Astonishingly enough, the sides had only met once prior to the EaF tie, in the League at Cnoc a' Choilich, when a Jim O'Donnell hat-trick had cancelled out an early Jake Allan opener, to keep the Lochies' League challenge alive. Tonight a strong Lochs side lacking only Angie Campbell, Andy Murray, and Daniel "Nipper" Mackenzie, faced a Carloway outfit which continued to wrestle with certain tricky selection problems.

Patrick Vigurs was out of the picture, while Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod and Kevin "Barra" Macneil were unavailable, but the manager still took the bravest of decisions to rest his creative midfield, Eachainn Miller and Dan Crossley, to protect them for what was considered the more important fixture on Saturday evening. Power was drafted in to fill this giant hole in midfield, with Andrew "Tago" Maciver and Domhnall Mackay entrusted with the holding and forcing roles. "Windy's" wriggle-room was further constrained by a late call-off from stalwart right-back, Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur (sickness), and the continued absence of Ross "Tiny" Maclean. Angus Grant had also returned to the mainland. However, there was some good news with the return of emerging stars, Joe Armstrong and Callum "Beag" Mackay, allowing Ben Smith to switch across the back-line to a more favoured side, right-back, and "Beag's" pace to be employed on the right flank to test Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie.

The evening of the EaF saw the diehards withstand two Biblical plagues - a swarm of insects and a deluge which rivalled the Iguassu Falls in volume. What one - or two - to expect tonight? Locusts or frogs were unlikely. A thunderstorm of hail and fire, perhaps? Certainly the darkest of cloud covers seemed only a couple of metres above the players' heads and the hurricane-force sou-westerly was capable of carrying the unwary all the way to Broadbay.

Nonetheless, the home side roared into action from the whistle and almost buried the visitors in the first ten minutes, creating three clear-cut chances. The Carloway defenders had hardly set out their stall when Lochs should have opened the scoring - within 30 seconds. From the kick-off, the ball was played back, then wide left, then forward, then inwards in a bewildering, high-speed move involving Macmillan, Robert M., Maclean and in again to the arriving Robert M., bursting between the surprised "D.I." and "Laxay" but, from the edge of the box, his usual sure touch deserted him, and the advancing Craigie managed to produce a miraculous flick on a drive he should never had a chance with, nudging it low to his right and round the post.

In 4 minutes Macmillan and Robert M. again combined to feed O'Donnell breaking left into the space behind Smith and wide of "D.I.", 22 metres from goal. He cut in sharply but again "Van Der Sar" reacted magnificently to race out and block his drive from 16 metres for another corner. Robert M. met the corner by the near post, 12 metres from goal, but his header looped well over. Moments later, Mackay blocked an "Uig" drive from the right side of the box, the ball breaking diagonally outwards towards the Lochs' left, where Robert M. met it 22 metres from goal and sent in a measured up-and-under towards Craigie. The ball thudded down, 12 metres in front of the keeper, then

bounced high to his left, forcing Craigie to scramble back across his goal to flick the ball away, for yet another corner, high beside the left junction of bar and post.

As “Pongo” and Mackay found their roles, the creativity of Macmillan and the driving aggression of Mackenzie was contained outwards to some extent, not stifled, allowing “D.I.” to assume his John Terry role on the elusive O’Donnell and “Laxay” to emulate Ricardo Carvalho around him, though resisting the temptation to track the deep-lying Maclean outwards.

Both sides seemed comfortable after that blistering opening quarter-hour, Lochs patiently probing; Na Gormaich, rebuffing, though less imprisoned in a brutal siege within their own half as they fought Lochs for possession. In 23 minutes Macmillan sent O’Donnell clear on the right behind Armstrong but beyond “Laxay” and “Van Der Sar” once again excelled himself by blocking the hitman’s low drive from 16 metres. The resulting corner was won by Robert M. in the centre, 14 metres out, but he had to lean back to meet it and his header looped harmlessly over the bar.

It took till the half-hour for Carloway to seriously threaten James Macleod, a deep “Dokus” corner being met by the near post, 14 metres from goal, but “D.I.’s” header was speeding wide before Macritchie kneed it away.. And then, out of nowhere, Carloway could have taken an unexpected lead. As “Nomie” played the ball wide to Peter “Robbie”, midway within his own half on the Carloway right, Calum “Beag” challenged and the Lochs’ defender’s attempted clearance rebounded behind him. As Peter M. raced to cover, “Beag” flicked it past him before steaming inward on goal, but as Macleod advanced, the young star hurried his attempt and from the right edge of the box pulled his right-footer into the keeper’s left-hand netting.

In typical football fashion, however, just as Carloway started to equal the Maroons in territory and possession, the home side took the lead. Peter “Robbie” gathered the ball in the centre circle, before moving square leftwards to find Peter M. bursting down the left to drive the ball forward to Robert M. He made the line but his low cross was blocked outwards by “D.I.” to Macritchie on the left corner of the box, and he immediately side-footed a right-footer high and well-wide of an unsighted keeper into the perfect unsaveable spot, just inside the top left corner of the Carloway goal (1-0).

The final chance of the half arrived in the 43rd minute when a “D.I” ball forward was headed on by Mackay in the centre circle for “Statto” to run free on the left. Sixteen metres from the line, his squared cross was met by Allan by the near post but his diagonally flighted header was booted clear by Peter “Robbie” inside the far post.

Half-time: Lochs 1 Carloway 0

The hosts might have been disappointed they had not struck early, and hence had given the Blues the opportunity to settle, then fight themselves back into contention, yet they still had a goal cushion giving them a vital edge. At this stage, however, the tie remained open, with neither side showing any

weaknesses, all 22 players on-message, not afraid of the ball, wanting to contribute. The advice to both squads must have been, "*Steady as you go*".

Immediately Carloway had a chance to make the contest even more exhilarating, when a "D.I." clearance was headed on by "Tago", just enough to take it over Peter M.'s head for "Dokus" to run in unchallenged on Macleod. However, the keeper rushed out instantly and blocked his low attempt from 16 metres perfectly, away for a corner on his left.

It was a costly miss, as two minutes later Lochs took another giant step towards the Championship, when a crunching Smith tackle on Maclean, midway within the right of the Carloway half, saw the ball break outwards to Robert M. He turned square rightwards across the line, then neatly back-heeled the ball to Macmillan in the centre. Without hesitation, the Lochs manager unleashed an unstoppable right-foot drive from 24 metres into the top right-hand corner of Craigie's net (**2-0**). An absolute corker!

If Carloway were despondent after this unexpected early shock, it certainly didn't show but no opening appeared until the 74th minute. A John "Uig" pass-back from just inside his own half eluded "Nomie" to his left and "Statto" ghosted in sharply, but the defender recovered quickly and dug deep to slide in a right foot, 16 metres from goal, and hook the ball away for a corner. Moments later Mackay was sent down the left by "Laxay" and, level with the edge of the box, squared in to "Tago", but his right-foot chip lacked power and Macleod was untroubled.

In 78 minutes a third opportunity dropped on na Gormaich when a Macmillan foul on "Dokus" led to a free-kick in the centre, 20 metres from Lochs' goal. "Dokus's" perfectly flighted ball took a slight deflection to the left of Macleod, but the young keeper reacted superbly to get across to tip it past the post with his left hand.

Carloway persisted, pushing Lochs back, as they sought some consolation; the Maroons quite happy to hold, play out, then break at speed. In 80 minutes "Laxay" moved forward out of defence and slipped the ball forward to Mackay, midway within his own half, in the centre. He flicked the ball wide to his right, to "Dokus" on the centre line, and he immediately stabbed the early ball through the centre for "Statto" and "Tago" to run in on goal. "Tago" got there first, ahead of "Statto" and Peter M., carrying it forward to the right byeline, before whipping across a high ball which the arriving "Statto" just failed to meet in the centre.

Moments later, Craigie had to race frantically from his goal, to clear away a Macleod kick-out, headed on by Price, as it raced towards the right edge of his box, just ahead of the rushing Peter "Robbie". The final real chance of the game fell to the Blues in the 85th minute when a headed "Laxay" clearance came to "Rab" Maciver in the centre, midway within his own half. He rapidly switched the ball right to "Dokus" on the centre-line and he took off at speed. Fifteen metres into the Lochs' half he released the perfect Jimmy McIlroy diagonally inwards between Peter M. and "Nomie" for "Pongo" to soar into the

right of the Maroons' box, but as Macleod advanced to make himself big, he rocketed the ball a metre over the near-side bar.

Full-time: Lochs 2 (1) Carloway 0 (0)

You pay £20+ in the SPL to see games that aren't half as good as this. Tonight's game was everything that Friday's wasn't, Italian-type artistry grafted on to mediaeval warfare, with a ball thrown in as an afterthought. Any participant unwilling to back up exciting ball-work with heavy body presence was simply swept aside. It's a wonder more people didn't end up in A. & E at the whistle with "Statto". In a world of Mackays, "Pongos", Morrisons, and Mackenzies, no quarter is given; no prisoners taken.

After the explosive opening from Lochs this developed into an engrossing advert for island football: tense, physically demanding, and two excellently organized defences denying their opposition any time in front of goal; plus two dynamic, creative midfields trying to find the key which might open the door. The home side roasted the visitors for the opening fifteen minutes, still edged possession and territory for the next quarter, and then both sides went head-to-head for the rest of the match, with Carloway's share of the "chances" increasing as the game progressed.

Using this as an indicator of the outcome of Saturday's Final, Ladbrokes would probably give any gambler evens on both sides, especially when it is assumed that Eachainn Miller, Dan Crossley, and Andy Murray will bring their talents to Goathill. However, Carloway must have their fingers crossed that those injured tonight will recover: Jake Allan (twisted ankle); "Statto" (two head gashes requiring staples/glue); and Gordon Craigie (injured shin).

Lochs Man of the Match: John "Uig" Morrison.

Carloway Man of the Match: Ali "Laxay" Macdonald.