

Moldova Lewis Cup Final :

Lochs 3 (2) Carloway 1 (1)

*Jim O'Donnell 4, 44 Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 1 min. 50 secs.
Niall Houston 90+2*

*At Goathill Park, Stornoway.
Saturday, 3.9.16, 17.30.*

*Referee: Willie "Mashie" Macleod.
Stand-side line judge: Andrew Macaulay.
Far-side line judge: Kenneth "Bugsy" Smith.
Fourth official: Calum "Chancey" Macleod.*

*CARLOWAY: 4-5-1.
Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.
Asst. Managers: Kenny "Noley" MacLennan; "Gus" Maciver.*

Gordon Craigie

*Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur ■ Donald "D.I." MacLennan ■ Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Joe
Armstrong*

*Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald Eachainn Miller Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Andrew
"Tago" Maciver Archie "Statto" MacDonald
Dan Crossley*

*Subs. used: Jake Allan ■ (Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur) 66; Callum "Beag" Mackay (Andrew
"Tago" Maciver) 74.*

Subs. not used: Ross "Tiny" Maclean; Ben Smith; Euan Gilmour.

Yellow cards: Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur 15; Donald "D.I." MacLennan 61; Jake Allan 79.

LOCHS: 4-4-2

Manager: David Macmillan.

Jim O'Donnell Darren "Cage" Wilson

*John "Uig" Morrison David Macmillan Niall Houston ■ Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie ■
Andy Murray Donald "Nomie" Macdonald Peter Mackenzie (capt.) Graeme Mackenzie
James Macleod ■*

Subs. used: David Macritchie (Darren "Cage" Wilson) 74; Chris Mackay (Andy Murray) 76

Subs. not used: Craig Maclean; Gordon Mackenzie.

*Yellow cards: Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie 15; James Macleod 30; David Macmillan 80; Niall
Houston 88.*

So, after a campaign lasting almost five months, the final game of Season 2016 had arrived, appropriately at Goathill. With Lochs leading 2-1 on head-to-head encounters (two League victories v. an EaF Final loss), the Blues now had the opportunity to claim a historic treble by beating the current Cup holders, who had seen off the Rubhachs in last year's Final in a gut-wrenching 7-6 penalty shoot-out. Na Gormaich's current form entitled them to moderate hopes of success.

After mixed results till the second half of May, they had embarked on a 7-game winning run, suffered a couple of defeats, then took off again on yet another glorious run, this time of eight straight victories, before coming back to earth last Friday at this ground, in a dismal defeat to United.

Yet last Monday's reverse at Leurbost had showcased several individual performances of note: a stellar second-half performance by Kenny "Dokus"

Macdonald; coming-of-age contributions from Callum "Beag" Mackay, Ben Smith, and Joe Armstrong - and, as a group, the team had grown in strength as the game unfolded. Added to this, the Maroons had yet another strength-sapping 90 minutes to endure on Wednesday at Garrabost, an unfortunate side-effect of that match being the injury which ruled out the influential midfield dynamo, Robert Mackenzie, tonight. No doubt, the boys in blue were ecstatic, seeing him standing on the terracing in mufti, rather than charging at them on the field.

Graeme "Windy" Miller had interesting choices to contemplate before tonight's Final, and, for once, these dilemmas were heartening: basically, who to leave out? What was the best strategy to employ against the newly-crowned League champions, to prevent the Mackenzies, David Macmillan, and John "Uig" Morrison quickly establishing their customary vice-like grip on the centre of the field, as they had done against Point?

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur had overcome illness and Archie "Statto" MacDonald declared himself fit, despite having staples and glue applied to two head gashes in A. & E. after Monday night's game. Jake Allan had recovered from his twisted ankle, but was not risked for the full 90 minutes and joined Ross "Tiny" Maclean, returned from Inverness, on the bench, beside Euan Gilmour and young stars, Callum "Beag" Mackay and Ben Smith, unlucky losers in the squad merry-go-round, despite strong performances at Creagan Dubh.

Those rested for that game appeared, Dan Crossley being given the main striking role to exploit his pace and ball skills against the Gneissian pair at the heart of the Maroons' back-line, Peter Mackenzie and Donald "Nomie" Macdonald, while "Dokus" was delegated right-wing/half beside the returning Eachainn Miller, no doubt in the hope they'd combine to set up the bullets for Crossley to fire. The power provided by Domhnall Mackay and Andrew "Tago" Maciver had been preferred once more in the centre of midfield as support for Miller and also as a holding bulwark in front of the ever-dependable, Donald "D.I." MacIennan and Ali "Laxay" Macdonald.

Andy Murray, who had missed the League match with Carloway but had started against Point, continued, and this allowed Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie to move to the right flank, replacing goalscorer on Monday night, David Macritchie, who dropped to the bench, alongside Craig Maclean, Darren Wilson being preferred as partner to goal-machine, Jim O'Donnell. However, the real surprise was the appearance of veteran stalwart, Graeme Mackenzie, at right-back, and this meant the promising Niall Houston could move forward to fill the spot vacated by the absent Robert Mackenzie.

At Creagan Dubh an explosive opening had seen Robert M. denied by Gordon Craigie within a minute. Tonight, "Dokus" went one better, although it took him nearly two. In Carloway's first attack, Mackay, in the centre circle, found "Statto" breaking down the left touch-line, wide of Graeme M. Square of the edge of the box, he checked back, then sent a mid-high right-footer curling across the line of the box. Peter M. and "Nomie" seemed to confuse

each other, the ball ricocheting onwards off them to "Dokus" on the right corner of the box. He didn't connect quite cleanly but his first-time left-footer whizzed in low towards the surprised Macleod, who tried to block it with his feet, but the pace of the ball carried it onwards off him to his left and inside the far post (0-1).

The midges hadn't even made up their minds who to bite before the Blues had a second glorious chance to distance themselves further from the Lochs, yet another high ball, this time from Miller, finding Crossley ghosting between the Mackenzies into the left side of the box, but this time Macleod was prepared and rushed out to block the striker's attempt expertly.

The whiz-bang opening continued in four minutes when O'Donnell levelled the score, a through ball from the right centre-line on the right touch-line leading to a misunderstanding between "Laxay" and "Van Der Sar" - "*It's your ball*", "*No, it's yours*", etc. - on the edge of the box and the Lochs man accepting the gift to whip it low into the centre of the empty goal (1-1).

The earth was already starting to shift towards the south, rather than the west when, after 10 minutes a trademark Macmillan free-kick, 22 metres out in the centre, cleared the wall expertly, but was read by Craigie, slightly to his left. Carlaway retaliated four minutes later when an exquisite Miller de Boer from the centre cleared Graeme M. for "Statto" to catch on the bye-line, then turn back and in, but Macleod and the back-tracking Graeme M. combined to block his effort for a corner.

A midfield stalemate now paralysed play as Mackay/"Tago"/ Miller joined horns with Macmillan/"Uig"/ and Houston in midfield and it was the half hour before Craigie or Macleod had to leave off combing their hair to contribute. A "Dokus" free-kick from 20 metres, out on the left touch-line, was floated in beautifully, à la Suarez, for "Tago" , 16 metres out in the centre, to meet perfectly, but Macleod reacted brilliantly to push his lightning-sharp header straight up and Graeme M. arrived to head the ball over his own bar to safety.

Nine more minutes had passed before Craigie had to prove himself, a whipped ball from the Lochs right, 14 metres from the bye-line, breaking outwards off "Laxay" to O'Donnell in the centre, but he snatched at the ball and hooked a low left-foot daisy-cutter well-wide of "Van Der Sar's" left-hand post. However, the big striker had only to wait another four minutes to atone. A forward ball from Houston on the centre-line shot towards the centre of the 18-metre line and "D.I." and "Laxay" both went for it, challenged by O'Donnell. The ball rebounded back and forth off each of them, then broke leftwards. The Lochs man reacted first to stab a heavy right-footer to Craigie's right and even though the keeper did well to get his right hand to it, the power of the drive took it through him and home (2-1).

Half-time: Lochs 2 Carlaway 1

There was not a shaft of light between the sides at the interval but the pace, rhythm, and movement of the Final were clearly now controlled by Lochs, just as they had been in the League decider at Garrabost. Macleod was rarely

threatened, as the Lochs' midfield negated the power of Mackay and "Pongo" and creativity of Miller, just as they had done to the Macdonalds, Hugh Morrison, and "Ali "Wally" Maciver on Wednesday. None of these players were failing to perform; they simply were swamped in a midfield quicksand, forced to play across the line and send speculative, rather than precise, passes forward. Crossley was the loneliest man in Stornoway, unsupplied and forced to chase any forward ball which was fired downfield direction-less: "Nomie", the Mackenzies, and Murray simply passed the ball around him and initiated the next Lochs' push. Fortunately, the Carloway back-line was equally stonewall, most of the time, so that O'Donnell had rarely been seen, although, like most top strikers, he "*hung about*", like Denis Law or Lou Macari, expertly finding that correct open space, waiting invisibly to punish his markers for any lapses in concentration.

In 53 minutes he almost secured his hat-trick when a long clearance from "Nomie" saw him fight off "Laxay" 20 metres from goal to race into the left of the Carloway box, but again na Gormaich's champion shot-stopper was equal to the moment to get down fast to his left to palm the low drive wide of his far post. In 61 minutes yet another Macmillan free-kick, 20 metres from goal in the centre, cannoned off the wall and off for a corner on Craigie's right.

It took na Gormaich until the 66th minute to create their only realistic chance of the second half when "Dokus" was sent down the right by a perfect Charlie Gallagher from Miller in the centre circle. He made the bye-line before cutting across a low diagonal which Crossley seized on by the near post, 10 metres out. Again, Macleod showed why he is the best keeper on the island to rush out and block "Raymondo's" low drive, then recover to block "Dokus's" follow-up on the rebound for a corner to his left.

To shake off the yoke, "Windy" boldly cast the dice. "Tiger", a defender, was sacrificed, the Blues risking three at the back, and Jake Allan coming on to rumble up the back-line, then Callum "Beag" entered the fray in place of "Pongo" to bring pace to the right to test a tiring Andy Murray. However, Macmillan responded by bringing on Chris Mackay for Murray, sacrificing class for pace in the last fifteen minutes

The tackling became brutal; the yellow card now appeared constantly, as the clock ran down, with neither side really threatening, Lochs holding, then breaking; Carloway pushing, with little success. Then, deep in added-on time, a ping-pong breaking ball came square from the left to Houston, 22 metres from goal in the centre, and his instant right-foot drive flew low and wide of Craigie and deep into the keeper's left-hand corner (**3-1**). The strike confirmed a result that seemed to have been inevitable for some time.

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

And so season 2016 can now drift off into history. Will it be remembered by all or some as "*The Year Such-and-Such Happened*"? Or simply forgotten, of slight interest to statisticians and historians like John "Brooks" or Malcolm Macdonald? This week Carloway have appeared to have inverted tradition,

and saved the worst till last. The exhilarating 15 wins in 17 games will be forgotten as there is always a tendency to remember how a season ended.

Last Friday's game against United was a soporific nightmare, an exercise in how to sleep-walk into defeat (with the reasonable excuse of lack of squad availability); Monday's League fixture, if you can forget the opening 20 minute-grilling, was a re-affirmation of intent, a promise of a bright performance tonight, but unfortunately that promise was largely unfulfilled, as Lochs recovered magnificently from an opening stunner to exert a tighter and tighter vice-like grip on proceedings the longer and longer the game went on.

Carloway weren't exactly outplayed tonight, more outwitted, by an outfit whose strategy played to, and encouraged, their strengths. Experience helps, of course, and familiarity with fellow team members over the years, but still the *totaalvoetbal* aspects of the Maroons' game-plan, the capacity and willingness to change shape and tactics as circumstances developed and/or changed, simply stifled na Gormaich in midfield and suggested they did not have any game-plan to combat what has become a standard fixture of Lochs' approach to opponents. Perhaps there is no available game-plan to utilize to combat Lochs when they are in this form - certainly trying to power through the centre didn't work, and "Dokus" and "Statto" lay so deep on the flanks that it left Crossley gravely isolated up front. This meant he had to search and claim the ball, then frequently take on Peter M. and "Nomie" on his own - a tall order for even Messi or Ronaldo, who, like every other star striker, still need support and, hopefully, balls to their feet.

Lochs Man of the Match: David Macmillan.

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