

A.B.C. Cup Round 1:

Back 1 (1) Carloway 1 (0) (after extra time. 1-1 after 90 minutes) (Carloway win 4-2 on penalties.)

Chris Mackay 4 Archie "Statto" MacDonald 76.

At Col Uarach.

Monday, 7.4.17, 18.30.

Referee: Neil Macritchie.

Carloway line judge: Alasdair "Tiger" Macarthur.

Back line judge: Alasdair "Red" Mackenzie.

CARLOWAY: 4-5-1.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

David Beaton

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Andrew "Tago" Maciver ■ Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Joe Armstrong

Jordan Macleod Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Murdo "Squegg" Macleod Kenny "Dokus"

MacDonald ■ Archie "Statto" MacDonald ■

Callum "Beag" Mackay

Subs. used: Sven Wiltshire (Murdo "Squegg" Macleod) 73; Andrew "Lanky" MacDonald (Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald) 101.

Subs. not used: Gordon Craigie; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod; Matthew Murray.

Yellow cards: Andrew "Tago" Maciver 72; Kenny "Dokus" MacDonald 88; Archie "Statto" MacDonald 96.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose". In 2016, the first Carloway match report ran, "*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*". Substitute, "*across the bay*" for "*through the valley*" and that description could easily have been applied to proceedings tonight at Col Uarach.

Last season, the Blues' opener against United had to be put off at Goathill on Friday, 7th April, to Monday, 10th, then a further postponement of the tie caused the Wasps to feel obliged to switch their opening encounter of 2016 west to Carloway the following Wednesday. Tonight, conditions were marginally better, despite the rain, allowing a much-changed na Gormaich to begin their defence of the A.B.C. Cup.

Five starters from that United game almost a year ago were absent, while ageing superstar, Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie, featured this evening on the bench, alongside new signing, Sven Wiltshire (from United), Stuart "Gochan" Macleod, Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald (brother of former "great", Louis); and Matthew Murray. The absence list was extensive: the Blues' own Goikoetxea, Donald "D.I." MacIennan, was suspended (after his harsh red card last August versus United) and Dan "Raymondo" Crossley's talents will be missing this season from midfield, due to continuing knee and shoulder problems; Jake Allan, Eachainn Miller, and Kevin "Barra" Macneil also did not feature. Josh Harris has, of course, returned to Ness, and Ross "Tiny" Maclean's work commitments preclude extensive selection.

There was some good news, however: ace goalkeeper, David Beaton, last seen on 2nd August, 2014, in Inverness versus Avoch before being stretchered off in the 88th minute, was back under the bar, while another stalwart, Andrew "Tago" Maciver, ex-Tanzania, now Florida, was back on the island for the season. Despite fake news of his retirement, Murdo "Squegg" Macleod also continued in his familiar role, as central midfield *animateur*, with "Tago's" arrival in central defence beside Player of the Year 2016, Ali "Laxay" Macdonald, flanked by Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur and Joe Armstrong, allowing Domhnall Mackay to hold the line beside him. New arrival, Jordan Macleod (ex-Athletic), carried the right, enabling pace-merchant, Callum "Beag" Mackay, to lead the line against Jason Macleod and Campbell Macdonald.

Back may not have had the best of seasons last year but they still managed to inflict a lot of pain down Cnoc a'Choilich way. It had all started brightly enough for the Blues in early May, racking up three first-half goals at home against the Bacachs in Round One of the Jock Stein, but then a rampant opposition blasted their way back to parity with three minutes to go. However, just as Back scented dazzling victory, a weird wind-assisted winner from Jake Allan in the last minute sent the Blues through to a Semi-Final at Garrabost. Two dismal reverses followed within the next fortnight at Col Uarach, nevertheless, 0-2 in the League, then, more painfully, 0-1 in the HAC Round 1, in the latter of which na Gormaich set a new Island record for the number of shots that can clear a crossbar in 120 minutes.

Carloway did get a form of revenge in July in a 1-0 home League victory, most memorable for a hotly-disputed 81st minute penalty award from "Chancey" (at the game tonight on crutches!) which led to a clearly bemused Back "Man of the Match", Ali "Tolsta" Maciver, being sent off for deliberate handball.

Bad experiences never seem to stop dropping on the Blues out here in Coll. The new defensive/midfield line-up had hardly arranged themselves for the coming contest when they were one-down. An early Blues' break on their left was repulsed, and Jason Macleod's high ball forward cleared Armstrong's head for Joel Martin to control and make the bye-line. His whipped high cross was deep but, 12 metres out by the far post, reverse-headed back inwards to Beaton's left for Chris Mackay to ghost in unchallenged and knock home (**1-0**).

To their credit, na Gormaich came back strongly, with a "Dokus" free-kick midway within the Bacach half, on their right touchline, being knocked out to "Tago", 20 metres from goal in the centre, but his snap drive soared high over. After ten minutes a Jordan Macleod run on the right and cross, 20 metres from the line, was caught by the wind and dropped on the edge of the box in the centre. "Statto" immediately slipped the ball to "Dokus" on his right and he neatly side-stepped his marker rightwards to flash in a nasty, waist-high drive which Maciver saw late, yet managed to dive sideways to his right and push away for a corner. In 20 minutes another "Dokus" free-kick, this time just inside the Back half on their left, was hooked in high to the centre of

goal with his left-foot. The leaping scrum could not connect but unsighted the waiting Maciver and again he had to react late to paw the ball away for another corner to his right.

As Macleod stretched the Bacach back-line wide right and tested their pace, "Statto" tended to gravitate inwards to support "Beag", while "Squegg" and Mackay dominated the centre, allowing "Dokus" space to trick an opening; Chris Macleod, Mackay, and "Gordie" Maciver were only occasionally able to liberate their dangerous wing-men, who pressured "Tiger" and Armstrong for pace. A minute later "Squegg" found "Dokus" racing down the right touch-line. He checked, 16 metres from the line, doubled back, and delivered a glorious in-swinging cross which dipped nastily behind the retreating back-line for "Statto" to surge in, directly in front of Maciver, but, 8 metres out, he had to reach sideways to hook the ball goal-wards and the keeper once again managed to block for another corner.

In 25 minutes broken play in the centre allowed Macleod to surge through the middle and play "Statto" forward into the box, but again the ball would not run for the Uibhisteach and as he tried to control it, Maciver was out at his feet to block, 10 metres from goal, and the ball was scrambled clear. A minute later a "Squegg" free-kick from just inside the Back half, to the left, came whizzing in like a Tomahawk missile towards Maciver who raced out to meet it on his 6-metre line but was challenged heavily by "Statto" and "Pongo", and the ball spun high off the group and away past the left-hand post. The last "real" moment of the first half came in 36 minutes when yet another "Squegg" free-kick (who's going to take them when he REALLY does retire?), this time all of 35 metres out in the centre, zoomed a couple of metres wide of Maciver's right-hand post.

Half-time: Back 1 Carloway 0

Where are "Frazmac" or Jack Buchanan when you need them? There had been plenty of positives (and problems) for the manager to consider in a moderately successful first half. After being caught cold by an early Bacach opener, the Blues had established a smooth-running midfield cohesion to dominate, but had squandered several golden opportunities through a mixture of rustiness, carelessness, and inspired goalkeeping from Michael Maciver. Wholesale change seemed unwise; sharper reactions in front of goal were what were necessary.

However, "Bomie" and "Dano" had obviously been less understanding in the home dressing room and a red-eared Bacach XI immediately upped the tempo from the restart. "Gordie" and Chris Macleod, largely anonymous in the first half, became more visible in support of Chris Mackay in the centre, and David Beaton, who'd spent the first half checking his Twitter feed, suddenly had to earn his half-time Bovril.

At first Carloway were able to sustain their attacking momentum, leading to two early "Squegg" free-kicks: in 53 minutes, on the Blues' right, 20 metres from the bye-line, he curled in a beautiful, high left-footer but Jason Macleod

cleared easily. Then, two minutes later, from midway within the Back half, slightly to the right, he found Mackay, 12 metres from goal, but his strong header went straight to Maciver.

Immediately the Bacachs broke down their left, and Louis Macdonald's sharp, low cross from the bye-line saw Chris Macleod just beat "Laxay" to the ball in the centre, but his instant flick from 12 metres went straight up and over. The sides were now effectively confining each other to few clear chances, in a confrontation whose outcome had suddenly become a lot less clear.

In 70 minutes a glorious opportunity arrived for na Gormaich with a disputed free-kick in the centre, right on the edge of the box, but "Dokus's" careful strike went straight to the keeper. Six minutes later, as Carloway's efforts to gain parity became desperate, an enormous "Dokus" free-kick, just inside the Back half, on the left touch-line, came sailing in to find "Statto" unmarked in the centre, 12 metres from goal, and, without jumping, he carefully nodded the ball well wide of Maciver's right-hand. A simple goal (1-1).

Awareness of the approaching nightmare of a penalty shoot-out lent urgency to the final minutes but the only real chance that arose occurred in 82 minutes when a Back charge through the middle sent Macleod in on the right towards Beaton but the keeper earned his oranges by reacting smartly to his left to block away. Unfortunately, this was to be the influential midfielder's/striker's final contribution, being carried off in 88 minutes after a crunching tackle from "Dokus", of all people.

Full-time: Back 1 (1) Carloway 1 (0)

Because of the premature, darkening conditions, the teams had little chance to settle things in a curtailed extra-time period (7½ minutes + 4½ minutes). Anxiously for na Gormaich, Back were to hold the initiative throughout. In 92 minutes a melée on the left edge of the Carloway box led to two blocked drives against the massed bodies of the Blues' defence, before a curious event in 99 minutes caused Blues' hearts to flutter. Beaton, 12 metres out on his right, mishit an attempted clearance from a back-pass and the ball spun backwards and sideways across his goal. Luckily for the Blues, the desperate, racing keeper just managed to beat an approaching striker to the ball, to boot it clear beside his left-hand post. Phew! That would have been one for the record books!

Extra-time. Half-time: Back 1 (1) Carloway 1 (0)

In the deepening gloom 22 weary, fed-up players only served up one further incident of note, when a Bacach surge down the left saw the ball slipped into "Gordie" in the centre, where he side-stepped a tackle to his right to fire in a low drive from 20 metres, which Beaton did extremely well to see, then push away, at full stretch to his left.

Full-time: Back 1 (1) Carloway 1 (0)

Penalties: Carloway went first:

CARLOWAY

✓ Jordan Macleod scores 1-0
Beaton 1-0

✓ Domhnall Mackay scores 2-0

✓ Andrew "Tago" Maciver scores 3-1

✓ Archie "Statto" MacDonald scores 4-2

BACK

✗ Michael Maciver saved by David

✓ David Maciver scores 2-1

✓ Chris Mackay scores 3-2

✗ Gordon "Gordie" Maciver saved
by David Beaton 4-2

So, after a fluctuating encounter that could easily have been won by either side within the regulation 120 (102 really!) minutes, Carloway eventually contrived to keep one hand on the trophy. Carloway had a reasonably encouraging 60-65 minutes tonight, only clouded by their inability to convert any of their chances/free-kicks into goals. This, of course, led to that gnawing feeling that later in the game, once Back had got their midfield engine to stop spluttering and engage in the centre, the Blues might be punished, as they could have been right at the death by "Gordie". After all, he did just that last season in the HAC, in the 107th minute!

Fortunately, Back had the same problem as Carloway, although they had far fewer opportunities to find this out, as "Pongo" and "Laxay" were faultless in central defence throughout, though over-confidence at times did cause occasional concern, especially when "Laxay" decided to *Roger Byrne*-it out of his box. A dominant midfield, Mackay/"Squegg"/"Dokus", and inventive wing-play from Jordan Macleod did manage to control play and get the ball into the Bacach box repeatedly in that first hour or so, mainly high, but with two of the best headers of the ball being in midfield (Domhnall Mackay) and defence ("Tago"), this meant "Statto" had to be the target except at set pieces, as Callum "Beag's" talents are in harrying, and running with the ball; a tireless chaser and ball-to-feet guy.

Back Man of the Match: Chris Mackay.

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