

Lewis and Harris League :

Lochs 2 (0) Carloway 3 (0)

Ross Allison 63

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 56

Robert Mackenzie 69

Domhnall Mackay 84 (pen.)

Archie "Statto" MacDonald 88

At Creagan Dubh, Leurbost.

Wednesday, 3.5.17 19.00.

Referee: Willie "Mashie" Macleod.

Lochs line judge: Calum Murdo Mackenzie.

Carloway line judge: Calum "Cobby" Macleod.

CARLOWAY: 4-4-2.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Asst. Managers: Domhnall Mackay; "Gus" Maciver.

Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Donald "D.I." MacIennan Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Joe Armstrong

Jordan Macleod Domhnall Mackay (capt.) ■ Archie "Statto" MacDonald Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Callum "Beag" Mackay Andrew "Tago" Maciver

Subs. used: Billy Anderson (Jordan Macleod) 70; Ben Smith (Joe Armstrong) 79.

Subs. not used: Stuart "Gochan" Macleod; Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald; Sven Wiltshire.

Yellow card: Domhnall Mackay 61 (serious foul play).

LOCHS.

Manager: Alex "Tippex" Maciver

Ross Allison Johnnie Smith

David Macritchie ■ ? Robert Mackenzie Lewis Mackenzie

Daniel "Nipper" Mackenzie Peter Mackenzie (capt.) Niall Houston Darren Mackinnon James Macleod

Subs. used: No. 12 (No.9) 35; ? (Niall Houston) 56.

Yellow card: David Macritchie (serious foul play).

Tonight the once-feared venue of Creagan Dubh provided the setting for two struggling sides to fulfil a fixture that both clubs probably wished could have been postponed to a much, much later date: say, 2018, for instance. No island side wishes to face perennial top dogs, Lochs, on their home territory, of course, but Carloway may have been even less in the mood to visit Leurbost after three consecutive trouncings from their west coast neighbours, Westside.

For their part, the Maroons had not had an enjoyable winter. Though reigning Champions for the NINTH time, they were now undergoing a major lack-of-availability crisis: in the close season, ace midfield/frontman, Robert Jones, had opted to join rivals Point, while Chris Mackay had decamped to Back; *midfield animateur par excellence*, Angie Campbell, was out for the season as he recovered from an knee operation and 2016 top goalscorer, Jim O'Donnell, was in crutches, and had not trained all winter; Graeme Mackenzie had retired and long-term fitness problems and/or minor injury had ruled out Andy Murray, Donald "Nomie" Macdonald, and John "Uig" Morrison.

Even worse, the man who holds it all together, the inspirational David Macmillan, was absent on holiday.

The only positive vibes emanating from the home dressing-room were that, after a year out, Johnnie Smith was back to lead the line, partnered by the recently-arrived Ross Allison from United. Also, Daniel "Nipper" Mackenzie, rumoured to have moved to Community, re-appeared in his old position at left-back, with ex-Ness S.C. star, Lewis Mackenzie, starting at right wing-half. Former Blues' great, Darren Mackinnon, scorer of the decisive penalty at Garrabost in September, 2012, which defeated Back 7-6 in the Coop Cup Final shoot-out and broke na Gormaich's trophy famine, appeared at right-back.

"Windy" once more moved the chess pieces around in search of a sound and creative midfield and attacking formation which might find the oppositions' nets more frequently. Andrew "Tago" Maciver, ebullient on Monday night, was drafted forward tonight to support Calum "Beag" Macleod wide with Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur recalled at right wing-back. The promising Jordan Macleod retained his post at right half/wing to test "Nipper" for pace, while Archie "Statto" MacDonald and Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald continued at left midfield and left half/wing respectively.

Regarding last season, the sides collided four times, two of those in finals. Last May in the League at Cnoc a' Choilich, Dan Crossley and "Tiger" were both suspended but Jake Allan had managed to give the Blues an early lead off a Calum "Beag" feed, but then goal-machine, Jim O'Donnell, had come to life and destroyed the home side with a tap-in and two beautifully-taken headers. This set the scene for a historic August night in the Carloway annals, with a first-ever Eilean an Fhraoich Cup win, in their SEVENTH final, strangely enough at the home of their opponents. After O'Donnell had equalized a first-half Angus Grant goal, na Gormaich went nap with a Graeme Mackenzie own goal, followed by Eachainn Miller and "Dokus" strikes, before Robert Mackenzie brought the show back down to earth, 2-4. Normality was restored just over a fortnight later when David Macritchie and David Macmillan settled affairs in a torrid 90 minutes of unarmed combat here. and in September there was further misery for Carloway at Goathill in the Moldova Cup Final when an O'Donnell brace (the Carloway boys must really hate the sight of this guy) and a third in added-on time from Niall Houston overcame an explosive Blues' opening in which "Dokus" struck in under two minutes.

A beautiful windless evening greeted a sizeable crowd tonight at Creagan Dubh - yes, sometimes there are nights like these in Lewis - and from the north side of the ground a splendid vista was offered across the loch as far as *Cailleach na Mointeach*. No sign of *Searrach Uisge*, though, or midges, but May must have arrived as a *cuthag* could be heard clearly nearby. Not that the Carloway back-line had a chance to admire their surroundings as Robert Mackenzie was immediately sent steaming clear through the middle inside "Tiger" and left of "D.I." to unleash a low thunderbolt from 20 metres which a hardly-warmed-up "Van Der Sar" did brilliantly to block low to his right. What a save!

However, this was to be one of the few moments of excitement in a first half in which both sides struggled to establish a creative cohesion and construct possible scoring opportunities. In 14 minutes a Mackay feed from the centre circle found "Dokus" 22 metres from goal towards the left of the box and he sped forward between Mackinnon and Mackenzie but Macleod was out like lightning to block him. The rebound gave "Dokus" a second chance and he sent a low right-foot side foot to the left of the scrambling keeper but Houston, arriving in the centre of goal, managed to boot it clear from 10 metres out. A minute later another Carloway move broke down and Robert Mackenzie, moving forwards from the Lochs right through the centre into the Carloway half, tried his luck with a powerful Ronnie Koeman-style right-footer but it flashed a metre outside Craigie's right-hand post.

In 22 minutes it was "Tago's" turn to move left into the space behind Mackinnon, who had been drawn forward to face "Dokus". The wing-man slipped the ball neatly past the back for the charging "Tago", but, again, Macleod read it and was out like lightning to block his attempt within the right corner of his box. "Tago" recovered to turn back and hook the ball to the left of the retreating goalkeeper but Macleod managed to get his left-hand to it and it spun outwards into the centre, where Callum "Beag" met the ball first-time, but his low snap drive from 22 metres was pulled a couple of metres wide of the Lochs' right-hand post.

Seven minutes later, "Dokus" lurking in the centre, intercepted a Mackenzie clearance, moved forward at pace and delivered a right-foot drive from 22 metres, but Macleod had little trouble grasping it low to his left. Three minutes later, Lewis Mackenzie, just inside the Carloway half, out on the right touch-line, turned in away from Armstrong, and from 35 metres cracked in a high curling ball towards Craigie, which dropped a metre *en route* before thudding against the centre of the bar. The ball then spun upwards and down again, leading to a mad scramble around the centre of the Blues' goal, 12 metres out, before "Van Der Sar" grabbed it.

Half-time: Lochs 0 Carloway 0

The lack of shape and creativity on both sides must have disappointed both "Tippex" and "Windy". Neither side really deserved to be ahead, based on the paucity of chances which had appeared. If Robert Mac.'s attempt had gone in, it might have presaged a completely different 45 minutes. However, it was difficult to see any major change in the ranks which might have improved either team's prospects. More of the same was the order of the day and it was 56 minutes before a significant event altered the course of the game.

A Lochs attack was broken on the edge of the Carloway box by a headed "D.I." clearance, which was picked up by Callum "Beag" who progressed at speed throughout the centre into the Lochs half. He rode a crunching tackle to make 20 metres from goal, before checking and slipping a square ball left to "Dokus", unmarked on the left, in line with Macleod's right-hand post. The ace goal-scorer took a couple of paces forward before sending in the sweetest of low right-foot drives just inside the foot of Maroons' right-hand

post. A clinical finish which gave the best goalkeeper on the island no chance! **(0-1)**.

Many in the crowd probably believed that was it – the Carloway squad started to behave as if it was, no doubt, judging by their closure of ranks, until an unlikely event arrived in the 63rd minute. A Peter Mackenzie clearance/forward pass from the left side of his box came whizzing straight forward and Allison gave chase into the Carloway half. No Blue seemed to wake up to the danger this posed until Craigie began a desperate race to his right to reach the slowing ball before the ex-United man. However, an unchallenged Allison got there just before him, inside the corner of Craigie's box and flicked a neat right-footer to the desperate "Van Der Sar's" left. The ball trundled goalwards and just managed to beat an arriving Armstrong's desperate efforts to cross the line by the near post **(1-1)**.

Immediately, na Gormaich tried to respond, with "Statto", midway within the Leurbost half, finding "Dokus" diagonally to his left. The wing-man found the corner of the box, cut in right, then sent in a low right-footer, which Macleod got down well by his right-hand corner to push away for a corner.

Then the wheels fell off. A Lochs surge down the right saw Mackenzie make the corner flag, lose the ball, regain it, check back, then send a low diagonal inwards to Robert Mackenzie, standing all alone in a space as big as the Gobi Desert on the right edge of the box. As the Carloway midfielders frantically raced back to stifle him, the star midfielder wiped his brow a couple of times before sending a trademark right-foot rocket high into the left-hand corner of Craigie's goal **(2-1)**.

Twenty minutes left on a chance-free night suggested that might be the final score as Carloway wobbled, undoubtedly kicking themselves for retreating subconsciously after "Dokus's" strike, supposing that Lochs tonight might never score at all, never mind twice.

In 72 minutes a corner on the Lochs right led to a Smith header, 16 metres out in the centre, whizzing a metre past the Blues' right-hand post. A moment later a break on the right capitalized further on Blues' uncertainty as Mackenzie cut in, 20 metres from the line, to whack a drive from the corner of the box, which cracked the far side of the bar and was cleared.

Then a master-stroke from "Windy" turned the tide. Na Gormaich opted for three at the back as Smith replaced Armstrong and entered midfield. Immediately, a curious incident restored parity. A surge through the middle saw "Statto" receive the ball moving leftwards, down the side of the Maroons' box. A double assault seemed to sandwich him and he went down. Free-kick! No problem. However, as the players assumed the customary positions, it suddenly became clear that the referee had had another look and decided the "offence" took place within the area and handed the ball to Mackay. There did not seem to be any protest, and Mackay stepped up to thunder the ball low to Macleod's right, the keeper guessing right but desperately unlucky as its power took it through his heavy touch and home **(2-2)**.

The pendulum turned again. In 86 minutes a fired-up Carloway came forward through "Tago" on the left. Peter Mackenzie managed to block him 20 metres from goal, just outside the right of the Lochs box, but "Tago" recovered to thwack in the rebound, only for it to go straight to Macleod. Two minutes later, the tie was settled: a confrontation on the Carloway right, on the centre-line, saw Anderson loft the ball forward, via a slight deflection, to find "Statto" running rightwards on the edge of the box behind the Lochs back-line, apparently played onside by Mackinnon behind him on the Lochs right. The Uibhisteach didn't hesitate and drove a low right-footer just inside Macleod's left-hand post (2-3).

Full-time: Lochs 2 (0) Carloway 3 (0)

The beauty of football is its unpredictability. At half-time this game had no-score draw written all over it. Neither side looked as if they would ever score a goal - tonight or any other night - and had also achieved a feat that many would have thought impossible: they had staged a Lochs v. Carloway match that was undeniably boring, despite both sides' obvious commitment and desire to prevail.

The second half was its polar opposite. What the contest had really needed was a goal, and once "Dokus" obliged, the confrontation really took off and the last half-hour metamorphosed from ordinary/dull to exciting/evenly divided/tense. The lack of dangerous moments in the first half, no doubt, led the spectators to believe that once "Dokus's" delicately placed daisy-cutter had gone in, it was all over.

When Lochs roared back with a double, perhaps most believed for a second time that now it was settled. Then along came another unexpected double, this time from na Gormaich, admittedly courtesy of a rather fortuitous penalty award, and this time time had run out and it really was settled. A victory, and three goals: objects of desire last week which seemed unobtainable in the short-term, although admittedly, this was a much weakened Lochs side. Still, it is a start, a first League victory at Creagan Dubh for the Blues since 1980; a building block, and gives limited hope for the forthcoming fixtures, with several noteworthy performances from the back-line once more, but especially from the young ones, Jordan Macleod, Callum "Beag", Joe Armstrong, and Ben Smith.

Lochs Man of the Match: Robert Mackenzie.

Carloway Man of the Match: Donald "D.I." MacIennan.