

Highland Amateur Cup Round 1 :

Carloway 1 (0) Lochs 0 (0)

Andrew "Tago" Maciver 64

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Friday, 12.5.17, 19.00.

Referee: D. J. Maclean (Bragar).

Lochs line judge: Calum Murdo Mackenzie.

Carloway line judge: Calum "Cobby" Macleod.

CARLOWAY: 4-4-2.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

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

David Beaton

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

Jordan Macleod Domhnall Mackay (capt.) ■ Billy Anderson ■ Archie "Statto" MacDonald

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Andrew "Tago" Maciver

Subs. used: Kenny "Beag" Maclennan (Jordan Macleod) 57; Ben Smith (Billy Anderson) 71.

Subs. not used: Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie; Sven Wiltshire; Gordon "Tago" Macdonald.

Yellow cards: Billy Anderson (serious foul play) 60; Domhnall Mackay (persistent foul play) 83.

LOCHS.

Manager: Alex "Tippex" Maciver.

Calum Macleod Johnnie Smith

Craig Maclean John "Uig" Morrison (capt.) David Macmillan ■ Darren "Cage" Wilson

Ewen Montgomery Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie Darren Mackinnon Ewen Maclean

James Macleod

Sub. used: Jamie Feeney (Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie) 60.

Yellow card: David Macmillan (serious foul play/dissent) 13.

Ah, cup fever at Carloway! There are many cups in the islands but none ranks higher than the Highland Amateur. There is always a special buzz when any tie in this competition is about to take place, and the abject disappointment experienced on elimination in the local rounds colours fans', management's, and players' whole outlook for the rest of the season. Several island clubs have experienced the joy at reaching the pinnacle of amateur achievement, lifting this trophy: Ness (1984, 1991, 1992, 1995); Point (1994); Lochs (2003, 2005), and Back (2004); while others like Carloway (2014), and Athletic (1990, 2003) have suffered the most profound despair of defeat at the final hurdle.

That afternoon in Inverness in August, 2014, never ceases to arouse a gnawing feeling of wistful what-might-have-been within any Carloway *aficionado's* heart. If only the fickle hand of Fate had been on na Gormaich's side throughout that electric late summer. Sadly, it was not: ten days earlier at Fivepenny, their inspirational centre-back, Iain Angus "Gus" Maciver, half the reason they were in the Final in the first place, was hospitalized - 23 seconds from

the final whistle! Of course, Captain Marvel, Domhnall Mackay, and eventual Man of the Match in Inverness, assumed this role, but this meant a crucial bulwark disappeared from the centre that allowed the creativity of Dan Crossley, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, and Murdo "Squegg" Macleod to flourish. One-nil up on the day, class *animateur*, Dan Crossley, was compelled to depart the scene, one minute into the second half, with a serious knee injury.

Defeat in the EaF Final a week later by Westside, the only other unwon trophy on the Blues' wish-list (at the time), at Col Uarach, only compounded the misery. That latter problem has now been overcome, with victory last season at Creagan Dubh over the Maroons, 4-2, but 2014 and 2015 have staged first round defeats in the HAC, to Point (1-4) and Back (0-1), so that that appearance in Inverness was Carloway's last fixture on the mainland.

So, will the HAC always be the one that got away? Amazingly, no fewer than NINE of the squad that day featured in tonight's squad, although the 3-5-2 line-up from that afternoon had been ditched, the present 4-4-2 continuing and the only change from the 3-2 game last Wednesday being David Beaton taking over from Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie, who joined Sven Wiltshire on a much-changed bench: no Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald, Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod, Stuart "Gochan" Macleod, or Matthew Murray, but the return of the versatile Ben Smith, veteran Gordon "Tago" Macdonald, and former "*great*", Kenny "Beag" Macleod, back on the island briefly.

It was the Blues' opponents who were greatly altered, both strengthened and weakened. Continuing nagging injuries ruled out both indomitable Mackenzies: defensive king-pin, Peter, and midfield colossus, Robert; Niall Houston's leg problems ruled him out also. Darren Mackinnon was drafted from right-back inwards to partner the ever-dependable Peter "Robbie" Mackenzie, allowing Ewen Maclean to replace him right, while 15-year-old Ewen Montgomery took over from Daniel "Nipper" Mackenzie on the left. However, it was the midfield that radically changed from the League game, for, though Robert Mac. was missing, force-of-nature David Macmillan returned, partnered by the tireless John "Uig" Morrison, two adversaries the Blues just love to hate. With Craig Maclean and Darren Wilson wide, left and right, and the ever-dangerous Johnnie Smith supported up front by Calum Macleod, it was certainly game-on.

A fair-sized crowd gathered on a pleasant evening here in the west: light cloud with no bright, setting sun in the players' eyes; the icy wind of the last few days gone, and only a trace of the first *meanbh-chuileagan* of the year. The opening period played out like rushes from "*Braveheart*" or "*Gladiator*": as if traps had suddenly been raised somewhere off-set and two sets of brightly-coloured savages rushed screaming on-stage at each other. Carloway, of course, awaited a full-frontal assault, aware that last Wednesday's League victory at Creagan Dubh, 3-2, would be taken as a heinous insult by the Lochies, not least by their volcanic leader, David Macmillan, who, no doubt, ascribed that reverse to his absence that night on holiday.

From the whistle, it was crystal-clear where the main battleground would be: the centre-line, where Mackay, Anderson, and "Statto" glared threateningly at Macmillan and "Uig". D.J. Maclean's whistle was rarely out of his mouth as the war manoeuvres unfolded. In 4 minutes the visitors almost secured a dream opening. An in-swinging Macmillan corner from their left whizzed over head-high, to be met by Smith racing towards it 12 metres out,

but his header by the near post zipped diagonally across Beaton's goal without a touch and disappeared a metre outside the far post.

Carloway replied immediately and a "Dokus" corner on their right was nodded out in the centre by Peter "Robbie". "Tiger", in his customary station 20 metres out in the centre, instantly sent it wide to the left to "Dokus" on the touch-line, 16 metres from the bye-line. His beautifully-curved right-foot cross landed plumb on "Statto's" head, 10 metres from goal, towards Lochs' left-hand post, but his careful head-glance drifted wide of that post. In 14 minutes "Tago", midway within the Lochs' half, ghosted out to the left touch-line behind Maclean to escape the clutches of Mackinnon and Mackenzie, and received a welcome diagonal from Anderson. Instead of laying it off to the approaching Mackay or back to Armstrong, he suddenly whipped round and tried to surprise Macleod with a snap powerful drive, high towards the keeper's right. It came in fast but Macleod reacted competently to push the ball away high to his right for a corner.

Four minutes later na Gormaich experienced another fortuitous escape: a corner on the Lochs' right came across perfectly, high to the far post. Beaton raced out 12 metres, and fought to grab it under heavy pressure, but falling to the ground, it slipped outwards, then was knocked back in by Macleod. Armstrong saved the day, however, by somehow contriving to get across to the Blues' right-hand post to knock it away off the line. In 21 minutes it was Carloway's turn to break as Macleod was fed down the right by "Laxay", racing from his own half to slip the ball inwards to Anderson in the centre, and his immediate swivel and David Hay-diagonal sent "Dokus" forward to slip past Ewen Maclean and make the bye-line. His inch-perfect cut-back reached "Tago" racing along the back-line leftwards, on the edge of the box, but his instant connect landed in "Nitsy's" patio.

After a half-hour of energy-sapping exertion, the pace - not the in-your-face aggression - certainly dropped. It was the 36th minute before a Billy Anderson free-kick, on the left touch-line, midway within the Maroons' half, threatened to deliver an opener but a quality keeper like Macleod was already thinking of his next move before he clasped it. And then, yet another incredible escape for na Gormaich. A Mackinnon free-kick from the right of the centre line was angled towards the left of the Carloway goal where Macmillan, 14 metres from goal, managed to head the ball on strongly. Beaton did brilliantly to get a touch to it, and it came directly back off his right-hand post into a ruck of players, before being dug out and cleared by "D.I."

The Blues ended the half with a reflexive flurry. In 43 minutes a "Dokus" free-kick, 16 metres from the bye-line, on the Carloway left, came winging in alarmingly but Macleod forced his way forward and high, to punch the ball far away. Then, right on a very welcome interval whistle, Macleod once more managed to escape Montgomery's clutches to make 12 metres from the goal-line, then send an exquisite low, squared ball across the face of the Leurbost goal. However, a covering Maclean read the danger and whacked the ball away for a corner on the Lochs' right before "Tago" could make it.

Half-time: Carloway 0 Lochs 0

Quite a game. The players had certainly earned their half-time Bovril, with even a dash of rum in it, perhaps, for the coming 45 minutes - maybe 75 minutes!!! Penalties were even possible, or probable, to settle such a finely-judged contest. It hadn't been a half exhibiting the highest level of technical competence ever seen on the island - how could it be with

Andy Murray, Angie Campbell, and Dan Crossley only present as spectators - but for whole-hearted effort, commitment to task and marking, fearlessness in the most visceral contact - even life-threatening injury - it was top-class spectacle. Options were limited for improvement: "Tippex" only had one substitute, while "Windy's", though substantial, were unlikely to alter the game-play, which continued as it had left off.

It was the 56th minute before the next near thing materialized; a Macmillan corner on the Lochs' left clearing the central cluster to reach Maclean, 12 metres out by the far post, but his header crept a couple of metres outside Beaton's left-hand post.

A minute later "Windy" decided to gamble, to shake up what was becoming a settled format: Kenny "Beag" to bring power and depth to the right midfield, replacing the pace of Macleod. Seven minutes later the breakthrough came. A concerted power play on the left, ended with Anderson, on the left touch-line on the centre line, switching the ball rapidly square inside to "Statto", 24 metres from goal in the centre, and his immediate right-foot flicked lob forward curled over the heads of the centre backs to the left for "Tago" to ghost behind the line. Macleod instantly saw the danger and raced out but "Tago" remained calm, waited for the keeper to commit, then slipped a careful low right-footer through the helpless keeper (1-0).

Six minutes passed and then Carloway had several golden opportunities to kill the tie stone dead. A "Dokus" corner on the right dipped into the centre of goal, 12 metres from goal, and was flicked inwards by Mackay. It seemed to take deflections before striking the face of the bar and dropping down, where a whole scrum of players had a stab at it, before it was rebuffed multiple times off the line, then booted to kingdom come or further.

Clearly, the departure of pivotal rock, Peter "Robbie", on the hour had weakened the attacking drive of the visitors with the adamant force of Macmillan dropping back, the lethal Smith now more in midfield to support "Uig", and Jamie Feeney arriving up front. The balance of play had now moved another 10 metres away from Beaton, and na Gormaich edged closer to victory. In 72 minutes "Dokus" received the ball in the centre circle and turned and sent the early ball straight forward and low between Maclean and Mackinnon for "Tago". The big hit-man raced into the left-side corner of the box and whacked a crisp right-footer wide of Macleod, but the keeper reacted magnificently to drop and throw himself left to push the shot wide of the far post.

Three minutes later came the final chance of the night when Maclean delivered a high free-kick from the centre circle which dropped perfectly on Smith's head as he stood on the penalty spot. His glancing touch forward and rightwards sent the ball spinning unchecked to creep just inside Beaton's left-hand post, but "Statto" somehow contrived to dive backwards to his left to whip it away to the left, a metre from the line.

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

So, for a fourth time, Carloway are destined to meet their "*favourite*"(!!!) mainland side, Avoch (aye, right!!!), after the men from the Black Isle saw off a 9-man Loch Ness in Inverness, with an 86th minute winner. Naturally, mixed feelings occur at the prospect. Victory in the Second Round doesn't have the same resonance as victory in a Final, but would still be gratifying. Ghosts have to be laid to rest, after all. A main concern, of course, is that island teams have no direct experience of an opposition's quality, which can only be

assumed by reference to results and League position, in competition with other sides whose quality is also only a guess.

Judging by tonight's performance, the Blues certainly cannot be faulted in their naked desire to gain further success in the tournament. It was a display which demonstrated a dogged physicality, fearless commitment, and tireless aggression, though it was achieved by a more direct strategy than normal. The *totalvoetbal* tactic from goalkeeper through back-line to midfield was only employed occasionally and the long ball out of defence, the sweeping diagonals, and over-the-top balls were the norm, as Macleod chased and "Tago" stormed around up front. Whether or not that will work against the likes of Avoch - as we remember them - is open to debate. Still, the possibility of further progress in this competition seems more likely now than it would have appeared a fortnight ago.

Carloway Man of the Match: Billy Anderson.

Lochs Man of the Match: David Macmillan.