

Lewis and Harris League :

Carloway 2 (1)

Lochs 1 (0)

Kevin "Gochan" Macleod 3 mins.30 secs. David Martin 90
Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 90+2

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Wednesday, 5.7.17, 19.00.

Referee: D. J. Maclean (Bragar).

Carloway line judge: Calum "Cobby" Macleod.

Lochs line judge: Calum Murdo Mackenzie.

CARLOWAY: 4-5-1.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

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

David Beaton

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

Jordan Macleod Kenny "Beag" MacIennan Dan Crossley Andrew "Tago" Maciver Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Kevin "Gochan" Macleod ■

Subs. not used: Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie; Sven Wiltshire; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod; Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald; Matthew Murray.

Yellow card: Kevin "Gochan" Macleod (dissent) 65.

LOCHS: 3-5-2.

Manager: Alex "Tippex" Maciver.

Ross Allison Calum Macleod

Lewis Mackenzie ■ Niall Houston Peter Mackenzie (capt.) Darren "Cage" Wilson David Martin

Ewen Montgomery Darren Mackinnon Ewen Maclean
James Macleod

Sub. used: Jim O'Donnell (Calum Macleod) 61.

Yellow card: Lewis Mackenzie (serious foul play) 26.

Tonight's League reunion with Lochs had all the aura of a new season's opening fixture, it being over three weeks since Carloway's visit to Lionacleit to face Barra in the Co-op Cup. That scintillating 8-2 victory on a beautiful Benbecula afternoon already seemed like a memory recalled from a previous life. In one sense, this extended break had been distinctly unhelpful for the Blues as, after a demoralizing opening month to their 2017 campaign, na Gormaich had gradually but relentlessly generated a full head of steam, recording seven wins in nine ties, lasting from May 5th right through to June 12th, and only suffered a single defeat, and even that after a noteworthy and gripping display against the team *du jour* in the Highlands, Avoch.

So, once again it was "*time to leave the books in dust and oil the unused armour's rust*" as the Maroons would be in no mood to drop in for a quiet social call but desperate to avenge their first round HAC defeat here. The first surprise was the unfamiliarity of the opposition line-up. An extensive list of absentees included Donald "Nomie" Macdonald and Andy Murray (have they retired?); the inspirational David Macmillan (suspended); John "Uig" Morrison

(injured); Johnnie Smith; the Mackenzies, Robert and Peter "Robbie" (suspended), and so on. Angie Campbell, of course, was out for the season. However, one pleasant positive was the astonishing re-appearance of all-time great, David Martin, at wing-back for the Lochies. How long since he last graced Cnoc a' Choilich?

Carloway sorely missed the iconic Archie "Statto" MacDonald, the Uibhisteach also side-lined for the season after that nasty collision with Eachainn Miller in Benbecula; the ineligible Eachainn himself; and their captain, Domhnall Mackay, at "Christy's" wedding in Malta. Gordon "Tago" Macdonald, Callum "Beag" Mackay, and Ben Smith were also unavailable, but good news arrived in the form of returns for David Beaton in goal, Ali "Laxay" Macdonald in central defence, and the explosive Kevin "Gochan" Macleod up front.

An added significance to tonight's League fixture was that na Gormaich were no longer title outsiders. As a result of victory over United last month on the 12th, and the Siarachs' unexpected draw at Col Uarach, the Blues were now serious League contenders, being only four points off the leaders with a game in hand. With the four "big boys" (!!!) squaring up tonight - Carloway v. Lochs and Point v. Westside - there was plenty at stake!

The old enemies had hardly inflicted serious pain on each others' shins before the home side shot into the lead, courtesy of the sweetest of moves. The power of "*up-for-it*" "Tago" won the ball in the centre circle, allowing Crossley to burst forward into the Maroons' half. His early diagonal left found "Dokus" lurking towards the touch-line, midway within the Lochs' half. He invited Martin towards him, before switching rapidly past him down the line. Twenty metres from the bye-line, he unleashed a perfect Martin Peters, high across the retreating Mackinnon and Montgomery towards "Gochan", 12 metres out and unmarked by the far post. It was in classic "*will I / won't I?*" goalkeeper territory, but as Macleod chose to stay, "Gochan" waited patiently for the ball's arrival before nodding it calmly, just inside the helpless keeper's left-hand post (1-0). Not spectacular, but beautifully created, delivered, and taken.

Naturally, this fired the Blues up and for the opening half-hour they came at the visitors confidently. The power and aggression of "Tago" dominated the centre, the pace of Macleod tested Montgomery on the right, and the unpredictability of "Gochan" posed repeated problems up front for Mackinnon, but it was the surging pace and creativity of Crossley which engineered the openings. In 7 minutes the ball again was shifted diagonally left towards "Gochan", 22 metres from goal. Maclean seemed to intercept, before a not-so-sly but unpunished shove in the back by Macleod allowed him to receive the ball and instantly dispatch a cracking right-footer high towards Macleod's right. However, the Lochs man chose to demonstrate why he is the best goal-minder on the islands by somehow getting outstretched left fingertips to the ball to tip it over.

The "Dokus" corner from the left was met by "Gochan", 12 metres from goal

close to the near post, but his glancing header powered on to the central bar, before a defender's boot helped it all the way to Garynahine. Four minutes later an enticing "Dokus" free-kick, 22 metres from the bye-line, on the right touchline, descended into a fighting scrum around the Lochs' penalty spot, ping-ponged around for a few moments, and then was blocked outwards and cleared downfield by Houston.

Gradually, Houston and the Mackenzies managed to contain na Gormaich's forward push through the centre, despite Jordan Macleod repeatedly testing Montgomery on the right, and threatened on the half-hour down their left through Mackenzie. His low cut-back from the bye-line reached Allison, 20 metres from goal by the near post, but his attempted conversion whizzed well over the bar. In 36 minutes the men from Leurbost came even closer, when another corner from the Lochs' left came over high, 12 metres out. Amazingly, the ball flew untouched across the face of goal but Armstrong reacted swiftly to meet it and reverse-head it clear by the far post.

A minute later Houston and the Mackenzies engineered another break on the left but Lewis Mac.'s whipped-in low cross from almost the bye-line broke out off "Tiger" to Allison, 20 metres from goal by the near post. However, his hasty right-foot stab flew high and wide of Beaton's left-hand junction of bar and post.

In 40 minutes Lochs had their best chance of the half (or did they?) when Martin, on the right centre line, played the ball forward down the right. The squared high cross was headed out by Armstrong by the near post but Houston (?) met the ball 12 metres from goal by the near post and clubbed a bouncing right-footer back in to Beaton's right. Fortunately, for the Blues, "Tiger" was on hand, a foot from the goal-line, to boot clear what looked like a certain goal. However, the flag was up and Carloway were awarded a free-kick a couple of metres from their goal. So? Offside, or what? Presumably the "goal" wouldn't have counted.

Half-time: Carloway 1 Lochs 0

Carloway must have regretted not establishing more daylight between the teams in their opening 30 minutes of dominance and clearly needed to re-discover the cohesive power and momentum they had exhibited in the first half-hour, though, understandably, it would be beyond any team, even full-timers, to maintain that standard of pace and aggression for 90 minutes.

Lochs had weathered the storm, Mackinnon, Peter Mac, and Houston, with assistance from Martin and Lewis Mac., digging in eventually to stem the flow and must have considered themselves unlucky not to equalize, going in to the interval.

In 56 minutes Mackinnon tried his luck from midway within the Carloway centre but his free-kick travelled a couple of metres over the bar. Then, on the hour, another glorious chance to kill it arrived for the Blues. As Lochs pressed, Kenny "Beag" won the ball midway within his own half, then sent a high breaker forward over their high back-line. The pace of "Gochan" allowed

him to burst forward in pursuit and into the box. Macleod was out like lightning to dive at his feet, but the ace striker managed to drag the ball past the keeper to his right, but as he went to convert into the empty goal, Maclean arrived from nowhere to slide in and knock the ball for a corner.

Six minutes later a throw-in by Carloway's left corner flag came square to Lewis Mac. and he nodded the ball straight back to Martin, lurking 12 metres out from the Blues' left-hand post. However, he had to stretch to connect and his left-footer curled harmlessly past.

The pattern of the first half seemed to be re-occurring, though a final flourish from the Blues almost killed the contest. In 70 minutes a "Dokus" corner on the left broke outwards in the centre off a ruck of players to "Pongo", just inside the Maroons' box, but his instant left-foot drive flashed a foot wide of Macleod's left-hand junction of bar and post. Two minutes later a whirlwind break out of their own half saw Crossley and Kenny "Beag" combine to send a glorious Macilroy splitter, between Mackinnon and Montgomery, for Macleod to out-pace the line and move into and across to the left of the Lochs box. Sixteen metres from goal he checked and as the Lochs defence converged on him, he laid the ball perfectly square to his right to the supporting, unmarked "Gochan". However, unfortunately the hit man had too much time to think about his chance, went for power, and pulled a grinding right-foot daisy-cutter yards wide of Macleod's right-hand post.

As Carloway appeared to sink even further back, deciding to hold what they had and go for the odd lightning break, it soon was Crossley's turn to go off on a trademark dribbling race, which took him beyond several defenders and into the left of the Lochs' box. He then slipped the ball square to his right to "Gochan", but a covering Mackinnon managed to shoot back to intercept and whip the ball away for a corner.

Then, just as the Blues thought everything was hunky-dory-three points-full, a Lochs corner on their right reached Martin by the far post, and his downwards header forced its way off Beaton's hands and into the right corner of the Blues' net (1-1).

And that was it, everyone probably thought, an evenly-fought and hard-earned draw, until a Jordan Macleod corner on the Carloway right came over, deep into added-on time. Again the ball was knocked out high from the centre and again "Pongo" met it, this time with a right-foot drive deep into Macleod's right-hand corner box. The daisy-cutter seemed goal-bound but Macleod seemed to have saved the Maroons a point by getting down brilliantly to push the ball away to his right. However, the hovering "Dokus" was first to the rebound and rammed home the 122nd goal of his career into the unguarded net (2-1).

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

It's not often that Carloway defeat Lochs three times in the one season (in the League, 3-2 at Creagan Dubh; twice at Cnoc a' Choilich, 2-1 tonight, and 1-0 in the HAC Round 1 on May 12th). It certainly has been 270 minutes of hard

work for the Blues, edging a combative opponent (when has it ever been otherwise?), determined to maintain their place as **THE** team in the islands, despite being ravaged by injury to key performers and the final retiral of so many greats.

To be truthful, each of these contests could have gone either way: a bit of luck swung the game na Gormaich's way at Creagan Dubh when a curious penalty cancelled out a superb Robert Mackenzie strike; a moment of inspired play saw "Statto" free "Tago" in the HAC to mark up the only goal that night; and tonight "Dokus", like all ace strikers *à la* Denis Law, just happened to be in the right place to break James Macleod's heart and score an unexpected winner in a titanic encounter that seemed destined to end even.

Na Gormaich can be well-pleased with tonight's performance, the only grouse being, perhaps, an inability to kill off an opposition when in command. It's the oldest story in football: miss your chances when ascendant; then get stung by a last-minute equalizer/winner from your opposition. Still, the players must be congratulated for their application and tenacity, tonight and throughout this season, and also the entertainment they have provided after the opening headaches. There have been many commendable performances: in the League Lochs have been overcome home and away; Point beaten at Garrabost; and both Westside and Point have yet to visit Cnoc a' Choilich. If Ness can be overcome at Fivepenny next Wednesday, then, as the saying goes, *"the ball is in our court"*.

Carloway Man of the Match: Andrew "Tago" Maciver.

Lochs Man of the Match: Darren Mackinnon.