

Lewis and Harris League:

Carloway 4 (3) Westside 2 (0)

Kenny "Dokus" MacDonald 12 Martainn Shields (pen.) 67
Angus Grant 26, 39 Scott Graham 90+2
Domhnall Mackay (pen.) 65

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Friday, 21.7.17, 19.00.

Referee: Stuart Macleod (Shawbost).

Carloway line judge: Alasdair "Tiger" Macarthur.

Westside line judge: Iain Gillies.

CARLOWAY: 4-5-1.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

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

Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie

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

Callum "Beag" Mackay Andrew "Tago" Maciver Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Dan Crossley

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Angus Grant

Subs. used: Jordan Macleod (Callum "Beag" Mackay) 54; Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod (Angus Grant) 89.

Subs. not used: Ben Smith; Gordon "Tago" MacDonald; Andrew "Lanky" MacDonald.

Yellow cards: Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur 73.

WESTSIDE: 4-5-1.

Manager: "Murchadh" Macdonald.

Asst. Manager: Alex Matheson.

Luke Mackay

Martainn Shields Innes Iain Morrison Robert Shirkie Scott Graham Lewis "Preston"
Robinson ■

Duncan Maclean (capt.) Euan Shirkie Donnie "Noe" Smith Gordon Campbell

David "Lurch" Murray ■

Subs. used: Alex John Morrison (Martainn Shields) 70; Dan Macphail (Euan Shirkie) 82;

Subs. not used: Johnnie Wallace.

Yellow cards: David "Lurch" Murray 65; Lewis "Preston" Robinson 86.

How often have the Blues been in this situation in the last few years? Yet another "*Fiat voluntas ua*" moment had arrived for the Blues: not a decider, but a match that would go a long way to indicating where the Championship might end up in September. With five games to play, Westside were a point ahead of na Gormaich, who had a game in hand. Obviously, a win for either side would put them in pole position to lift the League trophy, with a draw probably more useful for the Blues than the Siarachs. Third-placed Point were already 6 points adrift of Carloway and were, most likely, already turning their thoughts to success in the Moldova Lewis, to add to the ABC and Jock Stein Cups.

The situation this evening must have been redolent with memories - both painful and inspiring - for several participants tonight. In September six years ago, Andrew "Tago" Maciver, Domhnall Mackay, and Gordon "Tago"

MacDonald were in the Blues' squad the night they entertained League leaders, Back, at Cnoc a' Choilich, aware that they had to defeat the visitors to maintain their League challenge, after squandering a seemingly unassailable lead with unexpected defeats to Athletic and Point. After a goal-less first half, the Bacachs took a 2-0 lead through "Bloxy" and "Frazmac" (the latter on our bench tonight!), before a storming finish from the Blues saw "Tago" score twice to bring them level with two minutes to go. You can imagine what the last few minutes were like - but a Herculean effort in the final moments wasn't enough - the title headed to Col Uarach.

Fast forward to Goathill, and late July, 2013: Carloway, seven points clear at the top midway through the campaign, faced their main challengers, the reigning Champions, Athletic. An early Murdo "Squegg" Macleod stunner calmed the Blues' nerves, before additions from Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod (yes, him again! Now a good guy) and Kevin "Gochan" Macleod sent na Gormaich roaring down the road to their first, and only, Championship, which was clinched, of course, in August, 3-1, at the ground of tonight's rivals! West's goalkeeper that night? Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie!

However, a year later, in another titanic encounter, Westside themselves had to dig deep at Barvas to hold off their nearest rivals, Lochs, a second-half header from the best header of a ball on the island, Scott Graham, securing a 1-1 draw and their sole Championship by one point from their opponents that night. So, many of the players tonight were accustomed to such pressure, although that doesn't necessarily make it any easier to perform on the evening.

The good news for the Blues was the return of "Laxay's" joint rock in defence, Donald "D.I." Maclennan, to frustrate Luke Mackay, who had already notched up 5 goals against the Blues this season. Domhnall Mackay moved forward into central midfield as an added bulwark beside "Tago", to combat the obvious threat of Scott Graham and Innes Iain Morrison, while the pace of Callum "Beag" Mackay was preferred initially to Jordan Macleod on the right to keep dead-ball expert, Duncan Maclean, withdrawn. Joe Armstrong, however, had a job on hand on the left, facing the eternally-pushing Gordon Campbell and the mercurial talents of Lewis "Preston" Robinson.

The setting would not have been inappropriate for a Sampdoria v. Genoa or Roma v. Lazio game: a golden, midge-free evening, with only the slightest of easterlies, which resulted in a huge crowd whose pockets were gleefully emptied by "Cobby" shortly before half-time.

West's strategy was apparent from the whistle: force it. Carloway were under immediate pressure as the visitors tried - and were generally successful - to be first to every ball, win every tackle, pressurize, keep the ball wide, down the centre, take on opponents. The action, i.e. unarmed combat, took place mainly within the Carloway half, but the high Siarach back-and mid-line was a real risk, being susceptible to the fast breaks of Dan Crossley, Callum "Beag", and Angus Grant.

The first chance arrived in 12 minutes when a a Shields corner on the Siarach left came sweeping low across the face of the home goal, 10 metres out. The ball broke off a number of bodies to the far post, where "Preston" flicked it inwards. It rebounded out, and Mackay connected instantly on the edge of the box, but his attempt took a huge deflection, high over for another corner. The next corner led to a mad scramble and clearance; an attempted return was blocked by Mackay on the centre edge of the box and he shifted the ball diagonally right towards the fast-breaking "Tiger". From just inside his own half he propelled the ball straight forward for Grant to whiz on to and make 16 metres from the bye-line. Just as Shirkie closed, the stumbling Grant managed to swipe a low right-footer square across goal and reach the arriving "Dokus" in front of goal. As Smith lunged, the wing-man stepped one pace to his right, before whipping a low right-foot daisy-cutter home to "Lurch's" right **(1-0)**.

Five minutes later it was Morrison's turn to show off his skills on the West left, midway within the Blues' half, twisting and turning like Thierry Henry wide and past "Tiger" and Callum "Beag" before sending in an inviting curler. "Preston", running towards him across the centre, got his head to it around the penalty spot, but the ball went straight up. In 20 minutes the Siarachs went even closer when a glorious Morrison breaker from the centre circle sent Mackay behind the line to race in on "Van Der Sar" but the young star held off his finish an instant too long and, 16 metres from goal, "Laxay" slid in to stab the ball away for a corner. Two minutes later Shields intercepted "Tago's" slip rightwards to "Tiger", and sped off from the centre line to deliver a thumping left-foot cross from midway within the Carloway half. However, it was just a shade too high for Mackay in the centre, on the edge of the box, and his attempted head-lob landed on top of the net.

Then suddenly, in 26 minutes, the Blues got a second: a mighty "D.I." free-kick, from just outside his own area on the Carloway right, came straight down the field towards Mackay, 22 metres from the bye-line. He tried to back-head the ball on, but it broke off a defender square inwards to Grant on his left. The hit-man battled his way through two crunchers from "Noe" and Shirkie to break clear in the centre, then stroke the coolest of finishes home into "Lurch's" bottom left-hand corner **(2-0)**.

It was a heart-breaker for the Siarachs, who had dominated possession, territory, and chances from the whistle, and as they wobbled momentarily, it almost got worse in 34 minutes. West lost the ball on their right, midway within the opposition half, and with Campbell stranded in an attacking role, "Dokus" was free to make midway in the Siarach half before delivering a perfect Martin Peters to Grant running square towards him, 16 metres from goal. However, his neat head-glance zipped a foot outside "Lurch's" left-hand junction of bar and post.

Nevertheless, five minutes later, the wheels really did come off the visitors' bogey, when a "Dokus" corner on the Carloway left dropped straight on to the toe of Grant, 10 metres from goal at the far post. The young man from Aberdeen made it all look so easy by stabbing out his right-foot to send a

first-time volley whamming between “Lurch’s” legs and into the net for his 12th goal in 5 games (3-0).

A final push from West saw a corner on their right headed out strongly by “D.I.” straight to Maclean, on the corner of the box, but his swift curling reply was a foot outside the near post.

Half-time: Carloway 3 Westside 0

The mood in the Westside dressing room at the interval must have been one of disbelief. The bovril was probably untouched. How can a team who had basically driven the first 45 minutes, in terms of territory, possession, and chances, be 3-0 down? From their own point of view, they had done everything right. Had Mr. Spock put a force-field around the Carloway goal? Was it best to continue, as they were, or change things round? Carloway had had a fair share of luck but had defended well, the main concern being how deep they had lain, leaving Grant unsupported for long periods, despite Crossley’s best efforts to support and supply, but was this a strategic choice or a reaction to the intense pressure they were under?

The pattern of play did not alter after the resumption, though West’s attacking became even more intense, laying them dangerously open to the counter-attack. In 46 minutes a “Dokus” corner on the Carloway left was reverse-headed back out towards the corner of the box, where Crossley met it first-time but his cracking left-footer bent slightly and travelled just outside the Siarach’s right-hand post. Two minutes later a typical, bustling “Preston” run took him thundering down the right past Armstrong to whip across a low, squared cross, 12 metres from the bye-line. Mackay nipped forward to meet it ahead of “Laxay” by the near post but his right-foot rocket on the turn was pushed away brilliantly for a corner by Craigie. Maclean’s left-foot in-swinging corner was met in the centre, 12 metres out, by Graham but his header flew a couple of feet over the central bar.

Then, in 56 minutes, na Gormaich had a golden opportunity to kill the game stone-dead. Interplay between “Dokus” and Mackay in the centre circle permitted “Dokus” to move left and send a perfect Charlie Gallagher diagonally past Smith and Shirkie for both Grant and “Tago’ to beat the line and run in unchallenged on “Lurch”. As the keeper came out, Grant let the ball run on to “Tago” but the midfield powerhouse, usually so deadly in such situations, went for glory and his right-foot Exocet from just inside the box almost hit Skylab.

West almost celebrated immediately as Morrison played the ball on up the left to Shields, who battled his way past “Tiger” and “D.I.” into the left corner of the box, but his right-foot scorcher was somehow touched on to the bar by “Van Der Sar”, and whizzed away to the left. Four minutes later Carloway’s greatest came to the rescue again, high at his right-hand post, when he beat away, under heavy pressure, a Maclean corner from his left. An undignified melée ensued in front of him before the ball was knocked outwards, only for Morrison to meet it on the edge of the box, but his hurried drive went a metre

over the bar.

A few minutes later it seemed to be all over; then it wasn't. A high ball forward by Mackay was chased by "Tago" behind the line on the Blues' right. "Lurch" came for it but couldn't quite make it, and brought 'Tago" crashing down. No argument - a penalty, although the big keeper might have been a little lucky to only see yellow. No matter. Mackay thundered the ball home expertly to the keeper's left (**4-0**).

That was it - or was it? Moments later, the never-say-die West pushed down the left, Maclean to Morrison to Mackay/Shields (?). As the attacker turned in, "Tiger" came in like a fridge-freezer through the Siarach, leaving him a heap in the area. Again, no argument, and penalty-specialist, Martainn Shields, stroked the perfect penalty wide of the diving Craigie and as far into his left-hand corner as was possible (**4-1**).

The Siarachs must now have believed the hex had been lifted and charged at the Blues, "Preston" immediately bursting down the right to cut back a low cross from the bye-line but Mackay, in the centre, was beaten to the ball by "Laxay". In 74 minutes he repeated his feat and this time Mackay got to it, around the penalty spot, but his header was slightly miscued and looped high to Craigie's right, giving the keeper time to hold it safely. However, West's concerted pressure did not lead to any more significant chances within the 90 minutes, and the game seemed to be all but over, when Alex John Morrison, on the West left and midway within the Carloway half, received the ball from Innes Iain Morrison, checked back, then sent a high right-foot in-swing into the centre. Graham saw it coming as he moved forward, knew exactly where he was going to put it before it reached him, and showed everyone on-field how to take a headed chance, by tucking it neatly just inside "Van Der Sar's" right-hand post (**4-2**).

Full-time: Carloway 4 (3) Westside 2 (0)

Abair oidhche! Macbeth ended his years feeling that life itself was "*full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*". He should have taken a break from murdering people and been at the game tonight and told the players that. They would have ignored him, king and all. For 95 minutes the vast crowd was treated to a spectacle that suggested the combatants' lives depended on it, like some Incas' ball-game where the winners - or losers - were sacrificed to the gods. It's a difficult game to assess overall as it brings up those hoary old questions in football: did Carloway "*deserve*" to win? Or, to put it another way, how can a team which dominates a game end up losing? Did West "*deserve*" to lose? Unanswerable questions, but it does happen frequently, a team ending up losers despite appearing to control a game. Yet it's always the team that scores the goals, or more of them, that "*deserves*" to win, if such a term can be applied to any team performance in football.

Whether or not Carloway turned up tonight intending to play as they did, is debatable. West certainly seemed to play the way they intended to and only spirited, in-depth defending kept them at bay, augmented by generous

helpings of good luck and hurried attempts at finishing. "Laxay" and "D.I." were impeccable tonight but, without Mackay's and "Tago's" support, they might have been overwhelmed as "Tiger" and Armstrong had tough nights trying to keep Shields and "Preston" at bay. Even "Raymondo" was drawn back frequently in support, and this, of course, meant that any counter-attack began, at best, from about 10 metres within na Gormaich's own half, leaving Grant, Callum "Beag", Crossley, and Macleod with a whole half to cover to threaten the opposition goal. Without the sharpness of Grant in attack, this might have been asking too much. However, the ball is now in Carloway's court, as the saying goes. Fingers crossed!

Carloway Man of the Match: Dan Crossley.

Westside Man of the Match: Gordon Campbell.