

Lewis and Harris League:

Carloway 4 (3) Ness 1 (0)

Domhnall Mackay 4

Jack Dunlop 87

Angus Grant 31, 32

Jordan Macleod 80

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Friday, 28.7.17.

Referee: Derek Nicolson.

Carloway line judge: Angus "Dee" Macarthur.

Ness line judge: Neil Macritchie.

CARLOWAY: 4-4-2.

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

Jordan Macleod Andrew "Tago" Maciver Domhnall Mackay (capt.) ■ Dan Crossley Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod Angus Grant

Subs. used: Ben Smith (Domhnall Mackay) 38; Matthew Murray (Dan Crossley) 73.

Sub. not used: Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald.

Yellow cards: Domhnall Mackay 14; Donald "D.I." MacIennan 55

NESS: 4-5-1.

Manager: Chris Macdonald

Jack Dunlop

James "Titch" Morrison Uisdean Russell-Smith Micheil Russell-Smith Innes Munro Robin Bell

Finn Rush-Taylor Neil Morrison Iain "Borve" Macdonald Donald Gillies Donald "Sweeney" Macsween

Subs. Used: Sean "Lefty" Macdonald (Innes Munro) 62; Colin Morrison (Uisdean Russell-Smith) 62

Sub. Not used: Chris Macdonald

After the misery of Friday night, it was vital that the Blues banished any recurrent thoughts of what-might-have-been from the dressing room and concentrated on the forthcoming bread-and-butter confrontations that could make or break their season. "*Take each game as it comes, one at a time*", is the current mantra according to Mourinho, Guardiola, *et al.* Believe that if you wish. Perhaps every game is equally important to every side; tonight's certainly was for the Blues. Na Gormaich could not count on any other side doing them a favour by defeating their challengers up the road.

In their only previous meeting this season, at the beginning of the month at Fivepenny, na Gormaich had trounced the Niseachs 6-2, in what reads like an effortless mauling for the Blues, but, in truth, it was a curious affair. Playing their preferred passing game, building from the back, and edging forward before the killer breaker, Carloway had certainly controlled the opening 45 minutes, creating, and squandering, several reasonable chances through a mixture of carelessness, bad luck, and desperate home defending. However,

it took an opportunist goal from the ever-lethal Jack Dunlop to jolt the Blues out of their play-along Birmingham City mode, sharpen the cross-hairs in the airgun, and take proceedings with greater seriousness. Two quick goals from Angus Grant and Dan Crossley arrived in quick succession just before half-time, courtesy of inspired play by Kevin "Gochan" Macleod on the right, and when the Ness defence decided to stay in the Ness F. C. Social Club for another round after the interval, Carloway ran riot in the opening quarter-hour of the second, with a further trio of goals from Grant, Crossley, and Jordan Macleod (his first for the club). Dunlop did pull one back later but Grant completed his hat-trick with 11 minutes left, and the three points were packaged and posted south-westwards to Cnoc a' Choilich long before the final whistle. So, on paper, a stroll in the sun for the Blues; however, those who were there know it was slightly more difficult.

Other cautionary warnings for the home side tonight were Ness's excellent victory on Wednesday night at Creagan Dubh over a troubled Lochs' side, 3-1 in the Moldova, and their grinding triumph at Col Uarach earlier to earn that penalty shoot-out win over the Bacachs in the EaF Semi-final.

Tonight, once more, Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie replaced David Beaton in goal with the management opting for a 4-4-2 set-up. Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, Callum "Beag" Mackay, and Sven Wiltshire were unavailable, allowing Jordan Macleod, Andrew "Tago" Maciver, Domhnall Mackay, and Crossley to form the midfield, with Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod beginning up front as twin striker in support of the over-worked Angus Grant.

Surprises facing them were the sight of the "retired" Donald "Sweeney" Macsween taking a break from "*Air an Lot*" to guard the Niseach goal, and their captain and usual centre-back, Neil Morrison, moving diagonally forward into a right-half position. James "Titch" Morrison, who only arrived moments before kick-off, started on the left, with Iain "Borve" Macdonald in central defence with Finn Rush-Taylor. Unfortunately for "D.I" and "Laxay", ace goal-scorer and perennial pain-in the neck, Jack Dunlop, led the line, assisted by fellow pest-of-the-first-degree, Innes Smith.

Summer in the west of Lewis had clearly ended around mid-afternoon on Wednesday. Tonight, the heat of the day had long disappeared as a biting cold sou'easterly chilled the bones of a huddled crowd, who were also subjected to sporadic squalls of icy rain. Both sides opened as if they had trains to catch, the opening whistle initiating a crushing collision of bodies which lasted for, more or less, 96 minutes. Early control of the centre ground, as ever, and by any means, was certainly the main aim.

Early pressure by the home side gained a result - another quick breakthrough. In 4 minutes a Jordan Mac. corner from the Carloway right led to a pin-ball classic in the centre, 12 metres out in front of "Sweeney". The ball bobbed back and forward; Mackay whacked it; it hit off one or two bodies and broke right; then the captain, following up, got to it first 10 metres out to the right of goal and ram-rodged a low right-footer across goal through the ruck and inside Ness's right-hand post (**1-0**).

The celebrations had hardly concluded before the Niseachs had a golden opportunity to restore equality. A Niseach break down their left touch-line saw Smith check back midway within the Carloway half, before sending a crisp, inviting diagonal, low across the Blues' goal. Armstrong, running back into the left of the Blues' box, tried to chest it onwards, but, instinctively, his right arm moved out and helped it away from his opponent behind him. Ouch! No arguments there! Russell-Smith struck the penalty perfectly, deep into "Van Der Sar's" left-hand corner, but the veteran keeper defied physics (and the referee's eye) to get across brilliantly and send the ball spinning away high for a corner.

This initiated a five-minute period of sustained Niseach pressure which the Blues were lucky to survive, as one - two - three - four corners from the Ness right were placed perfectly, head-jump high, 12 metres out in front of goal. This chaotic scramble ended with a Macleod drive from the penalty spot being blocked on the line by Jordan Mac. inside the Blues' left-hand post, and booted clear as far as Arnol Black House.

Carloway gradually managed to regain their equilibrium and a war of attrition began in midfield, between respective *animateurs*, Micheil R.-S. and Crossley, with Mackay and "Tago" weighing in heavily on the Ness star. In 19 minutes, na Gormaich thought they had gone two-up when "Tago" won the ball in the centre circle, rode a tackle as he moved straight forward to midway within the Niseach half, and sent a lovely chip diagonally leftwards for Grant breaking behind Macdonald. The young hit-man coolly finished from the left corner of the box with the sweetest of first-time connects, a low right-foot curler well away from the helpless "Sweeney" and just inside the far post. However, the flag was up.

Four minutes later the Niseach defence gifted him another chance when Rush-Taylor's attempted clearance midway within his own half in the centre was miscued, hit the back of his own man to his right, and rebounded back to give Grant a clear run on goal down the left. But as "Sweeney" rushed out to narrow the angle, the Aberdonian pulled a low right-footer from 20 metres a metre outside the near post. In 27 minutes a Jordan Mac. corner on the Blues' right led to a Macleod header being blocked on the left goal-line, before a Rush-Taylor free-kick in the centre-line was headed clear by "D.I." , only to be met by Michael R.-S. 20 metres from goal but his instant drive cleared the bar by a metre.

However, in the space of two minutes on the half-hour, the tie was effectively settled. A left-foot "Laxay" free-kick from the right of the centre circle cleared the central ruck on the edge of the box to reach Grant, lurking 16 metres out in the centre, and his superbly-timed right-foot volley flew low inside the Niseach left-hand post (**2-0**).

Then just like their ten-minute blind spell at Fivepenny earlier in the month, Ness appeared to lose concentration momentarily and immediately lost the ball from the restart. Mackay swiftly transferred the ball diagonally forward to Crossley breaking left behind his marker. He checked at the edge of the box

and whipped a low right-footer to “Sweeney’s” right; the ball cannoned off the inside of the right-hand post across the face of goal and a delighted Grant banged the rebound home in the centre from 10 metres (3-0).

Half-time: Carloway 3 Ness 0

The half-time score-line belied the harsh competitiveness of the opening half and also demonstrated the absolute necessity of taking chances, or most of them, whenever they appear. Ness had given as good as they got throughout, but especially in the first 20 minutes. However, momentary lapses in focus at the back and the pace and opportunism of the Carloway attackers had surely taken the game beyond any salvage attempts by the visitors, who seemed to be relying solely on Dunlop to claw them back into the match.

Na Gormaich’s approach altered markedly in the second half, defending high, flooding midfield, inviting the Niseachs forward, then breaking at pace through Crossley, Jordan, “Frazmac”, and Grant. It was the hour before this aggressive stalemate showed the slightest crack when “Titch”, supplied by Michael R.-S. on the left, managed to get behind “Tiger”, then turn inwards across Smith, but his hurried right-footer from midway within the Blues’ half went straight to Craigie.

In 64 minutes Carloway had the opportunity to go even further ahead when a mighty “D.I.” clearance from the edge of his area was met with a back-header from “Frazmac”, 10 metres inside the centre of the Ness half, which sent the ball careering past Rush-Taylor for Grant to steam in on “Sweeney”. The keeper raced out cautiously to make himself big and the forward chipped the ball neatly over his head from 16 metres - but on to the bar and over as well.

As the clock ran down, a raft of half-chances suddenly appeared for the visitors, courtesy of Morrison and Dunlop. In 70 minutes Rush-Taylor came forward, moving leftwards into the Blues’ half, before delivering a high diagonal to Carloway’s left-hand post. “Titch” moved to meet it, 12 metres out, but Craigie saw the danger and rose to deflect his attempted header away for a corner to his left. The corner was cleared downfield but as everyone retreated at pace it was fired back upfield, low. The ball broke left off “Tago” and “Titch” managed to ride a “D.I.” cruncher to move into the box but “Van Der Sar” was out like lightning to dive at his feet, 16 metres out, and rushed the young wing-man into belting the ball well outside the far post.

Three minutes later Ness were denied again, when a high cross from the right touch-line, midway within the Carloway half, was met perfectly by Dunlop, running towards it on the edge of the box, but his expert head-flick was read brilliantly by Craigie, 10 metres out of his goal, instinctively sticking out his left foot to block.

This was unfortunate for the Niseachs as in 80 minutes further misery dropped on them. A high ball forward by “Tago” found Grant moving forward through the centre. The young star saw his partner “Frazmac” time his run perfectly on his right to roar past his marker and accept Grant’s perfect breaker in his stride. “Sweeney” came to meet him and managed to push

away his stab from 12 metres to his left. The ball ran loose but before the keeper could drop on it completely, "Frazmac" recovered to poke the ball slowly across goal with his right foot. Grant, following up, banged the loose ball against a defender on the line, and the ball broke out even further to the left to the waiting Jordan and he gratefully accepted the gift, slotting home on the left past Rush-Taylor (4-0).

Five minutes later the Blues replicated the break with "Tago" sending "Frazmac" ghosting behind the line on the right, but this time "Sweeney" acquitted himself admirably by pushing the big striker's drive from 16 metres away to his right. However, the last hurrah belonged to Ness's tenacious warrior, Jack Dunlop, for yeoman service throughout up front. A final set-to in the centre circle saw Michael R.-S. manage to slip the ball to Dunlop who set off downfield, moving leftwards through one tackle, then rightwards towards the right edge of the Carloway box through another two tackles. He appeared to be losing control of the ball and leaving it behind, before falling backwards, he whipped round with his left foot to send a screamer raging past a helpless "Van Der Sar" and high into the right-hand corner of Craigie's net (4-1).

Add this to the list of amazing goals scored in Ness v. Carloway games. If there had been no net, we'd still be looking for the ball on Dalmore Beach!

Full-time: Carloway 4 (3) Ness 1 (0)

Every score-line tells a story, but it's not necessarily the right one. Sport, like life, has crucial moments or periods, when chances, choices, have to be taken. Any side "*— must take the current when it serves, or lose —*". Ness's "*moment*" came immediately after Carloway's opener, when they had the initiative for 20 minutes or so, and failed to grasp it. Carloway then thought they had doubled their lead, felt aggrieved at the offside decision, and this fired them up to regain control of proceedings, and effectively win the game by the 32nd minute. Not that the visitors gave up, or were suddenly undangerous - how could they be with a squad that includes Russell-Smith, "Titch", Dunlop, and Innes Smith? - but they were basically chasing a departing train from then on, playing in a way that suited Carloway perfectly.

The home side's solid back-line, weight in midfield, and pacy attack were able to march to their own drum throughout the final hour. However, tonight illustrated starkly the task facing the Blues, regarding a potential second Championship. This was an even contest for a third of the game, but even after that, Carloway had to fight doggedly to subdue a side currently, rightly or wrongly, at the foot of the table. Many, both at Cnoc a' Choilich and elsewhere, seem too think, well, five points clear with four games to go, it's more or less settled. Down at Col Uarach, Garrabost, and Goathill, they might be thinking differently, especially when you consider Domhnall Mackay's groin strain tonight (how serious is it, this injury to their inspirational captain?); the forthcoming suspension of towering defence stalwart, "D.I."; and the continued availability of deadly assassin, Angus Grant. The squad as it stands is definitely a candidate for "Best on the Island". Fitness and availability are the club's main concerns.

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

Ness Man of the Match: Micheil Russell-Smith.