

Lewis and Harris League:

Back 2 (1)

Gordon "Gordie" Maciver 25 (pen..) 83 Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod 24, 34
Dan Crossley 45

At Col Uarach, Coll. 19.00.

Monday, 31.7.17.

Ref.: Andrew Macaulay.

Carlway line judge: Alasdair "Tiger" Macarthur.

Back Line Judge: D.A. Macleod

CARLOWAY: 4-4-2.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

David Beaton

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur ■ Donald "D.I." MacIennan ■ Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Joe Armstrong
Kevin "Gochan" Macleod (capt.) ■ Dan Crossley Andrew "Tago" MacIver Callum "Beag" Mackay
Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod Angus Grant

Subs. not used: Jordan Macleod; Gordon "Tago" Macdonald; Ben Smith; Billy Anderson; Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie.

Yellow cards: Kevin "Gochan" Macleod 71; Donald "D.I." MacIennan 81; Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur 83.

BACK: 4-5-1.

Manager: James "Bomie" Macarthur.

Louis Macdonald

Stuart Macdonald Chris Macleod Chris Mackay Gordon "Gordie" Maciver Joel Martin
David Macleod Jason Macleod (capt.) Craig Macleod Ali "Tolsta" Maciver
Michael Maciver

Subs. Used: Declan Kettings (Chris Mackay) 65; Connor Mackay (Joel Martin) 90

As they sipped their après-dinner Mojitos and Manhattans on Sunday, it would be interesting to know what squad members were thinking of as they gazed out over Loch Roag, or Breasclete Bay, or wherever. Especially the older players: Domhnall Mackay, David Beaton, "Van Der Sar", "Gochan", the "Tagos", "D.I.", and "Dokus". After all, this was the third time they had been in this situation, on the brink of glory, knowing they had to win their last few League matches in order to secure a rare Championship triumph. Most were here, at Cnoc a' Choilich, that fateful September night in 2011 when the Blues took the field, knowing they had to defeat leaders, Back, to remain in the League race, after having squandered a sizeable points lead as a result of two miserable defeats to Athletic and Point. A gritty 2-2 draw was hard-earned, but just wasn't enough, and the dream evaporated *"like snow falls in the river"*.

However, fast forward two years to mid-August 2013, to Barvas, and our intrepid heroes were there again, centre-stage, now joined by other familiar faces, "Tiger", Dan Crossley, "Frazmaz", and Ben Smith, and this time they did not fall short and their pugnacious 3-1 victory over the Siarachs secured na Gormaich's finest hour, their only Championship.

So, what chance a repetition in 2017? The omens were good. Friday's hard-fought victory over a combative Ness side had opened up a five-point gap at the top over nearest rivals, Westside, with four to play; tonight's tricky encounter at Col Uarach,

an even-trickier home tie on Monday versus Point, then two away, facing each Stornoway side in turn.

Carloway's two previous encounters this season with the Bacachs hadn't exactly been heart-warming. On the opening day of the season, here in Coll, two clunky, misfiring outfits had struggled for 107 minutes to keep their fans awake in the ABC Round 1, with a late saver from Archie "Statto" MacDonald cancelling out a fourth-minute opener from Chris Mackay and setting up a penalty shoot-out, won by the Blues. In early May, at home, na Gormaich dominated possession and territory but profligacy in front of goal left them slightly fortunate to edge the visitors 3-2 in the League, in a contest mainly remembered for "Tago's" opening stunner, in 1 minute 4 seconds, set up by a sublime, low breaker from Billy Anderson. It also featured the briefest of brief "appearances" by Stuart "Gochan" Macleod.

Tonight, David Beaton returned in goal, with Craigie once more dropping to the bench, beside young-bloods, Jordan Macleod and Ben Smith, and veterans, Gordon "Tago" Macdonald and Billy Anderson. Unfortunately, Domhnall Mackay's groin injury required further rest, so he joined another injured "*great*", Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, in the Chairman's Executive Box. This entailed re-jigging the midfield: emerging talent, Callum "Beag" Mackay, re-appeared on the left, while the mercurial Kevin "Gochan" Macleod, making his 200th appearance in blue, was graced with the captaincy tonight on his return on the right.

For the Broadbay Blues, Campbell Macdonald was still out with his cruciate complaint, so Craig Macleod was handed the heavy task of putting the hems on speed-merchant, Angus Grant, while his brother, David, had an equally unwelcome task on the left, attempting to contain the explosive talents of "Frazmac", who, like Joe Armstrong, was making his 50th appearance for the club.

After the unpleasant afternoon, the rain and cloud had largely cleared away and Col Uarach was blessed with a beautiful, clear, windless evening, though the pitch looked quite heavy, suggesting it might prove a factor in proceedings later in the game. A period of broken play, in which each side grappled for an elusive cohesion, ended in the 13th minute when a "Gordie" free-kick in a dangerous position, on the right edge of the Carloway box, cannoned against the wall and was cleared. The ball broke back into the Carloway half and "Tago" and Crossley combined well in the centre to free "Frazmac" down the Blues' right past Macleod. Ten metres from the bye-line, he checked, then swept a low squared ball across the face of the Back goal, but Grant had over-anticipated the pass and the ball flew behind him to the left, where "Gochan" managed to control it, 18 metres from goal. He cut back past "Tolsta" and turned in but Jason Macleod dived in to block his attempted drive at goal from 16 metres.

The visitors were setting the Bacach back-line a test, a choice over how high to push, for as "Tolsta", Chris Macleod, and Mackay battled for midfield possession and control with "Tago" and Crossley, the latter repeatedly picked out Callum "Beag", "Gochan", "Frazmac", and Grant for the fast break. Eventually, in the 24th minute, it paid off. Crossley robbed "Tolsta" coming forward in the centre, 10 metres within the Blues' half, then sent the sweetest of chips diagonally forward leftwards for Grant to outpace Craig Macleod down the length of the Back half. He made 10 metres from

the bye-line before whipping across a perfect squared low ball for the arriving "Frazmac" to nip in just in front of David Macleod to ram home low to Maciver's right (0-1).

However, what is it Adèle sings " — *we've been here before* — "? Carloway had hardly finished their "*Well dones*" and slaps on the back before the game's first controversial incident dropped from the heavens. Straight from the kick-off, Back surged forward. The ball was played forward to the right as Chris Macleod moved into the right of the Carloway area. As he controlled it about 10 metres from the line, to the right of goal, Armstrong, caught on the wrong side of him, came across him and knocked the ball away inwards. There was contact, but it seemed innocuous; however, as the player went down, the referee had no hesitation in pointing to the spot. No prizes for guessing what happened next. Eventually, after the entire Carloway squad had been manhandled out of the area, "Gordie" sent a cool, low strike to Beaton's right as the keeper chose left (1-1).

The Blues slowly regained their calm and in 32 minutes a Crossley free-kick from the centre, midway within the Back half, was flighted perfectly, a *la* Roberto Baggio, right on to the toe of "Tago", standing off the back-line, 10 metres out from Maciver's right-hand post, but in his haste to whip the ball in, he miscued and Macleod thumped the ball to safety. Two minutes later, however, Carloway clicked. As Grant tried to trick his way across the left edge of the box, Craig Macleod was adjudged to have tripped him. Crossley arrived and clipped across the sweetest of head-high curlers behind the line but just too far for the keeper to come. Again "Frazmac" was there first in front of the Macleods and "Gochan" to head the ball strongly to Maciver's right from 10 metres (1-2).

In 42 minutes a neat Crossley slip, just inside the left of the Bacach half, freed Callum "Beag" down the left to make the byeline. Again, "Frazmac" was first to his cut-back to the right of centre, 12 metres from goal, but his touch wasn't clean and the ball bounced back to Maciver harmlessly.

Three minutes later, on the stroke of half-time, the second, "*Oh no, here we go again!*" moment arrived. "Tiger" won the ball in his own half and surged diagonally leftwards into the Back half, then checked, and squared to his right to "Laxay" who took off on one of his trademark stumbling runs. As he approached midway within the Bacach half, Chris Macleod came from behind with a sliding tackle from his right to knock the ball away, and in so doing, the Blues' defender went down. Again, contact seemed minimal, but as "Laxay" consoled himself on the ground and players milled around - protesting, organizing, you name it - "Raymondo" seized the moment and stroked the ball straight and low into the right-hand side of the unguarded goal from 25 metres or so (1-3). Now another entire, outraged team surrounded the referee - this time, Back - but the goal stood, and, thankfully, the whistle blew for half-time, giving everyone 10-15 minutes to cool off.

Half-time: Back 1 Carloway 3

So, an entertaining first half, with the visitors edging the chances, was largely forgotten in a maelstrom of controversy. At least each side could feel equally aggrieved; it would have been unfortunate if both "huge" decisions had gone against

the one side.

As far as Carloway was concerned, they were in a good place, and it allowed them to indulge their preferred second-half style more and more as the 45 minutes progressed - the solid high back-line; a flooded, combative midfield, then the sudden break at pace as "Tago" and Crossley freed "Gochan", "Frazmac", Grant, and Callum "Beag" down the wings or centre. Back had to live with this, hoping the two Chris Ms. and "Gordie" could conjure up an early break-through to revitalize their chances early.

However, as the minutes passed, the openings arrived at the other end more frequently. In 55 minutes a "Tago" cruncher just inside the centre of the Back half saw the ball run forward to "Gochan" and he turned and sent the ball forward immediately, diagonally towards "Frazmac" breaking on the right. Sixteen metres from the byeline he squared a high cross across goal which "Gochan" met on the penalty spot but it was just inches too high for him and his header spun away to Maciver's right. A minute later, from midway within the Bacach half, out on the left touch-line, Crossley delivered a perfect de Bruyne free-kick over the defensive line for Grant to meet head-high, 10 metres out in front of goal, but the ace goal-getter managed to reverse-head the ball well-wide of Back's right-hand post. Moments later, it was Callum "Beag's" turn to check back on the left touch-line, midway within the Bacach half, and send a glorious high in-swinger towards the near post, but "Frazmac's" powerful header from 16 metres went straight to the keeper.

Back, at this point, were simply unable to penetrate the Blues' back-line, nor contain Crossley in the centre or the pacy strikers he freed up front. In 66 minutes Crossley again won the ball in the centre circle and steamed forward into the opposition half, before unleashing a perfect Jimmy McIlroy between the Macleods for Grant to race into the left of the box. Maciver saw the danger and charged out to push the ball away from the hit-man, but his block ran forward out of his box and he was forced to chase it and boot it out of play. In 70 minutes Grant himself contrived to ghost behind his shadow, Craig Macleod, and send across a low square cross which "Frazmac" met by the near post, 12 metres from goal, but his clever flick played off Jason Macleod which made it an easy pick-up for Maciver.

Another opportunity arrived six minutes later when a Crossley diagonal once more picked out Grant racing clear on the left. Midway within the Back half he sent a low diagonal forward to "Frazmac" coming through fast on the break in the centre. As Macleod struggled to close the big striker down, "Frazmac" took his time, 16 metres from goal in the centre, to pick out his spot - and then stabbed the ball a foot over Maciver's left-hand bar. In the final ten minutes

Carloway appeared to settle for what they had, saying to themselves, *"Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown"*, and this mainly seemed to involve containing "Gordie", Back's prime *animateur*, by fair means or foul - usually the latter. In 80 minutes a "Gordie" free-kick, 10 metres in from the touch-line and 10 metres from the bye-line, was curled in beautifully and was heading inside Beaton's right-hand post before the keeper anticipated its flight and got across smartly to punch the ball outwards. "Frazmac" claimed the breaking ball just outside the right of his own area and sprinted off down the right like Usain Bolt, trailing defenders in his

slipstream. Eighteen metres from the line, he stroked across a low, square ball to Grant, appearing in front of goal. The striker tricked his way to the right of David Macleod but then sent his right-foot finish high to the left of goal.

Three minutes later it all became suddenly more interesting when yet another "Gordie" free-kick, this time 20 metres from goal, and 15 in from the touch-line, was curled in in a similar fashion towards Beaton's bottom right-hand corner as his previous effort. The keeper seemed to have it covered but he went down in a rather awkward fashion and the ball crept beneath him and home (2-3).

Cue all hands on deck - for both sides - in the final minutes but the home side were only able to muster one more realistic opportunity, when another free-kick was awarded 22 metres from Beaton in the centre, but this time "Gordie" sent his effort well over the top.

Full-time: Back 2 (1) Carloway 3 (3)

Wow! Late summer is certainly no "*season of mists and mellow fruitfulness*" for the Blues; well, maybe the "*fruitfulness*" bit is close to the truth, but the three points were not gained after an early evening stroll in the setting sun. This was a grinding Championship-winning display over a Back side who competed hard throughout and no doubt felt they deserved a point at least. However, to win games you have to create chances, and the bulk of those tonight were set up by the Blues. Mind you, you have to take those chances too, or a fair proportion of them, and na Gormaich probably earned another unwanted title tonight as Champions of the Missed Chances League.

This could have been costly against a more incisive opposition. However, despite "Tolsta", "Gordie", Chris Macleod, and Louis Macdonald working tirelessly throughout, Back competed without the same movement and speed as their opposition, so that "Laxay" and his team were able, most of the time, to anticipate and close out most assaults. The deciding features in this victory for na Gormaich were a sound defence, power and creativity in the centre, and pace on the break. This meant that the four-pronged attack, fed by frequent killer diagonals, regularly stretched and penetrated the home back-line. Hopefully, this pattern of play will continue in the League run-in and who knows? The Championship is just that little bit closer after tonight, and received an even further boost with the news of United's late equalizer at Barvas.

Back Man of the Match: Ali "Tolsta" Maciver.

Carloway Man of the Match: Dan Crossley.