

Lewis and Harris League:

## **Carloway 2 (1) Point 1 (1)**

Angus Grant 43

Andrew Morrison 10

Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 54

At Cnoc a' Choilich, Carloway.

Monday, 7.8.17, 19.00.

Referee: Willie "Mashie" Macleod.

Carloway line judge: Angus "Dee" Macarthur.

Point line judge: Scott Campbell, then Alec Wright.

**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

Domhnall Mackay (capt.) ■ Dan Crossley Andrew "Tago" Maciver Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald

Kevin "Gochan" Macleod Angus Grant

Sub. used: Callum "Beag" Mackay (Angus Grant) 86.

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

Yellow card: Domhnall Mackay (unsporting behaviour) 65.

**POINT:** 4-4-2.

Manager: Angus "Stoodie" Mackay.

Andrew Morrison Alex Macdonald

Alfie Macmillan Robert Jones Hugh Morrison Andrew Macmillan

Daniel Macleod Elliot Rudall (capt.) ■ Iain "Macca" Mackenzie Andrew "Mowgli" Macleod

Gordon "Gordie" Mackenzie

Subs. used: Andrew Mackay (Alfie Macmillan) 24; Scott Campbell (Andrew "Mowgli" Macleod) 70.

Yellow card: Elliot Rudall (dissent) 62.

If anyone had suggested on the evening of May 1st that in early August, Carloway would be in the position they were in tonight, they probably would have been sent for counselling. The Blues at that point had just completed their first four fixtures of 2017, and though they had ground out a penalty shoot-out victory over Back in the ABC Cup Round 1, they then had shipped 12 goals and only replied once in three straight defeats to their West Coast rivals, Westside. Misery cloaked Cnoc a' Choilich like a dense Atlantic haar at the thought of what awaited na Gormaich in the coming season.

Soon after, however, "Windy" must have bumped into Dr. Faust in Upper Carloway, as a rapid metamorphosis in the team's performances unfolded: 17 games have been played since then; the Blues have only drawn once and lost twice, both in Cup games; have reached the EaF Final and a Coop Cup Semi-Final; and stood, tonight, on the brink of a second Championship title. Assuming Westside won their final

three fixtures - away to Lochs, then home to Ness and Back - our heroes would be required to win at least once more in the League: tonight, or in their final two games at Goathill, versus Athletic and United in turn.

Tonight was the night to fulfil this promise; any squad member overcome by the emotion of the occasion or doubtful that they could contribute was at liberty to walk away and take up carpet bowls. None did. It's astonishing how quickly injuries or other calls on one's time disappear when you have the chance of selection for such a major event; a chance to say, "*I was there! I made it happen!*"

Of course, there was a small obstacle to be overcome before the coronation: like, the opposition, a Point side who probably thought on May 1st that they might be in the position that Carloway now occupied. They hadn't simply arrived to applaud the victors off the field. If they could spoil the party, they would, though in their three meetings this season, Carloway had emerged victors each time: 2-0 in the reverse League fixture at Garrabost in mid-May, and 2-1 (h) and 5-2 (a) in the EaF last month.

Those score-lines don't tell the full story, of course. Apart from the latter part of the Second Leg in the EaF, these games didn't just fall into the Blues' lap, but involved draining wars of attrition against a dogged foe, impelled forward by the David Hay-type runs of Angus Macdonald and elusive creativity of Ally "Wally" Maciver. No doubt the boys in blue noted with glee the injured Macdonald watching tonight from the side-lines and the absence of "Wally". Overall, it was a much-changed Rudhach team who took the field: ex-Blue, Gordon "Gordie" Mackenzie, took over in goal from Ally Lamont, stopper Alasdair Gillies was on holiday, and perennial *bêtes noires*, Andrew Murray and Stewart Munro, were absent. Less welcome was the return of force-of-nature, Elliott Rudall, in central defence beside veteran, Iain "Macca" Mackenzie; Andrew "Mowgli" Macleod (much-loved in the West !!!) at right-back, and super-*animateur*, Robert Jones, in central midfield, to the left of Hugh Morrison.

Unfortunately for the Blues, last Monday's two-goal man, Fraser "Frazmac" Macleod, was again off-island, and Ben Smith was unavailable, but Donald "D.I." Maclennan's suspension was not through yet, so the defence was unchanged; Domhnall Mackay and Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald had recovered from injury and joined Dan Crossley and Andrew "Tago" Maciver in an experienced midfield, while Kevin "Gochan" Macleod moved forward to partner goal-machine, Angus Grant, up front.

Conditions were perfect, the stage was set, but whether it was the weight of the occasion, the massive crowd of expectant Carlowegians roaring them on, or an aggressive, "*in-your-face*" approach from the Rudhachs, Carloway didn't hit the ground in their customary breakneck style, but struggled throughout a turgid opening 45 minutes to establish a *modus operandi*, a cohesive rhythm and fluency, against a Point side who were in no way in awe of what faced them.

The visitors edged a broken opening 10 minutes, gradually forcing the central battlefield further and further into the Carloway half and set the Champions-elect a real test in the 10th minute. A Point free-kick, on the corner of the box to Beaton's left, was curved in beautifully by Alex Macdonald to the far post, where the giant

figure of Rudall out-jumped the pack 12 metres out by the far post, to reverse-head diagonally to Beaton's left. Andrew Morrison was perfectly placed, unmarked, 6 metres from goal in the centre, to nod a simple header into an unguarded net (**0-1**).

Na Gormaich did not panic but attempted to spark up their traditional style of patient building from the back, through midfield, then the breaker wide or through/over the centre, but the engine simply would not fire. Lack of pace and control in the build-up caused them to repeatedly be caught in possession and/or lose the ball, and the defence was frequently stretched.

In 17 minutes Hugh Morrison, on the right, midway within the Blues' half, played square inwards to Jones who tried to find Andrew Morrison moving in front of him into the box. The ball rebounded outwards and Macdonald gathered it in the centre, moved leftwards, then smacked a flighted left-foot drive against the top of Beaton's right-hand junction of bar and post.

It was 24 minutes before "Gordie" had to stop checking his Facebook page and pay attention to proceedings, when Carloway gained a free-kick, 22 metres out to the right of goal, but Crossley's careful effort flew a metre wide of Point's left-hand post. Three minutes later "Gochan" received the ball on the right centre line from "Tiger" and raced forward diagonally past 1-2-3 opponents before slipping it forward to "Dokus", 24 metres from goal in the centre. "Dokus" performed his trademark one step right, then whipped round and sent a nasty daisy-cutter towards "Gordie's" right-hand corner. The surprised keeper was almost caught out but reacted brilliantly to throw himself rightwards and get his outstretched right-foot to the shot and send it whizzing away for a corner. "Dokus's" right-foot corner was met perfectly by "Gochan", 12 metres out in front on goal, but his header carried a foot over Point's right-hand bar.

As na Gormaich finally started to move more easily, the expected midfield battle between Mackay/Crossley/"Tago" and Jones/Morrison grew hectic, but in 36 minutes Jones once again broke the line with a classic Jimmy McIlroy to "Laxay's" left behind Armstrong for Andrew Macmillan to race on to. He burst forward to 20 metres from goal, on the right corner of the box, before letting loose a ferocious right-foot drive which was still rising when it passed over Cirbhig.

Then, suddenly, in 43 minutes, the Blues were on equal terms, a goal which did not depend on any patient build-up, but an enormous clearance straight downfield from Mackay, just inside his own box. It caught the Rudhachs over-committed and as Grant and "Macca" jumped, then jostled for the ball, it broke loosely behind them and Grant managed to get behind the defender on his left and race into the right of the box. "Gordie" was out like a flash, but the young star took his time, looked up, then slotted it coolly to the helpless keeper's right and inside the far post (**1-1**).

Two minutes later it was almost two, when another through ball forward, this time from Crossley, led to a wrestling match between Rudall and Grant, and again the striker managed to wriggle his way rightwards and into the box. As "Gordie" came put, he chipped him neatly; the ball hit the underside of the bar, then bounced down on the line, and a thankful keeper grabbed it. However, because no advantage had been gained by Carloway, and the referee adjudged Rudall to have impeded Grant

originally, much to the Point players' consternation, he awarded a foul against them on the central edge of the box, but "Dokus's" effort hit the wall.

### **Half-time: Carloway 1 Point 1**

From a Carloway point of view, the final few minutes had been encouraging but the rest of their first-half display had been dire. Even that might be too mild an epithet. Thankfully, the one Point failing had been an inability to create chances. What was wrong with the Blues? Slow on the ball; glacial build-up; constant loss of possession. There had been shades of this in the Athletic game: dreadful first half; but then a red-hot second half performance. Hopefully, this would happen here. Certainly the equalizer, deserved or otherwise, could not have come at a better time.

However, it very nearly got a whole lot worse again immediately, when "D.I.", covering a breaking ball on the right edge of his box, tried to flick it forward to "Tiger", moving down the right. But he miscued and hit the ball against Morrison, the ball rebounded back behind him, he slipped as he turned, and a very surprised striker moved in on goal. However, in his haste, he pulled his left-foot drive across goal and well-wide of the far post.

Seven minutes later Carloway found themselves in a lead which at one time seemed unlikely. "Tiger", who seemed to have discovered his inner Paul Breitner, played a neat one-two with Mackay before roaring diagonally inwards towards the centre of the Point box. He was crowded out as he attempted to force the ball through to Grant and the ball broke square right to "Gochan". His flick in broke off "Macca" and Rudall across the box and outwards, towards the Carloway left, and "Dokus", standing just outside the corner edge of the Rudhach box, reacted instinctively by swinging his right foot round high to crack the ball goalwards. The shot looked awkward as it hit into the ground then stotted violently at speed across the Point goal, but it carried just outside "Gordie's" desperately stretching left hand and just inside the far post (2-1).

This really opened up the game, but not in any enhanced, coherent form, as neither side seemed to bother picking up any one anymore, and for the final half-hour play raged from end to end. From the restart Jones broke free in the centre and sent a potential breaker to Macdonald, moving down the right. At the right edge of the box, he dummied Armstrong by cutting in along the line, but "Laxay" saw the approaching danger and managed to get a foot in to block his parting shot. In 61 minutes Mackay won the ball off Morrison on the central edge of his box, and picked out Grant beautifully with a high ball right to his toe, moving down the left into the Point half. He managed to evade two tackles, moving at pace inwards into the left of the Rudhach box but his left-foot drive carried well-wide of the far post.

Then, in the space of two minutes, two real escapes arrived for the Blues. In 66 minutes a Macdonald free-kick, 22 metres from the bye-line and out on Point's left touch-line, was flighted in beautifully towards the centre of goal. Morrison got in behind everyone and, 10 metres from goal in the centre, touched it onwards, but Beaton somehow knocked the ball on to his left, where the arriving "Mowgli" just failed to connect properly, low down, as the ball sped onwards beyond the far post. The ensuing corner led to another, on the far side, and when it came across, it

cleared the central ruck and picked out perfectly the ominous figure of Rudall, 10 metres out by the far post, but the normally deadly finisher placed his strong header a foot outside Beaton's left-hand post. Whew!

The Carloway faithful were now more interested in their watches than the game, as the team faced the classic dilemma, "*Hold what we have, or go for the clincher?*" In 70 minutes Crossley, in the centre circle, played the ball diagonally forward to "Gochan", breaking right. Midway within the Point half, he moved the ball on to Grant, moving off Macleod into the right of the box, but his strong, low clip whipped across "Gordie" and two metres wide of the far post. In 78 minutes Mackay found "Tago" thundering down the right touch-line. From the bye-line, he thumped across a high cross which was helped onwards by Rudall towards the far corner, where it was gathered by "Dokus". He cut backwards, then managed to trick himself back inwards past "Mowgli" along the bye-line, but a combination of "Macca" and "Gordie" contrived to beat away his low drive by the near post.

Three minutes later Carloway thought it was all over; the chance to finish it had arrived. Mackay and Crossley combined in the centre to send "Tago" charging towards the right of the Point box. Just on the line, he was sent crashing by Macleod. The crowd roared, "*Penalty!*", but the referee pointed to a spot an inch outside the area, and was instantly surrounded by players, each with their own opinion. It was the old chestnut: "Tago" had definitely gone down in the area, but where was he actually fouled? Grant sent the free-kick a foot over the bar. Moments later he was sent through on the right, on the end of a glorious Crossley breaker, but "Gordie" raced out to block for another corner.

And then, just as Kenny "Flip" was checking his notes for his congratulatory speech for the trophy presentation, there came two heart-stopping moments for the diehards. A Jones break on the Carloway left saw him slip the ball to Macdonald on the touch-line, and he lifted a beautiful curler into the Carloway box. In a mad scramble in front of Beaton, the ball broke back and forth off a number of players to Morrison, 12 metres out to the right of goal, and his instant rising cracker seemed to be touched upwards by Beaton, crashed off the face of the bar, went straight up, then down to the left, and was then booted downfield by Armstrong.

Immediately Point attacked again and gained a foul on their left, midway within the Carloway half. The box was packed as Macdonald sent in another expert curler, this time behind the retreating line. A crash of bodies resulted in "Tago" knocking the ball to Beaton's right and into the corner of the net. The Point players started celebrating their equalizer. Then they saw the referee indicating he had blown for offside before the ball had reached the box. The communal sigh of relief must have been heard in Inverness.

**Full-time: Carloway 2 (1) Point 1 (1)**

Watching Carloway is an ageing process, a true test of character. Goodness knows what strain the players are under competing in such a game. Hopefully, adrenalin swamps this anxiety. The Blues did have back-up chances, of course, if they had lost tonight, but the pressure would have been doubled in the Athletic match, doubled yet again if victory was necessary against United. Ask the Point players

how they felt going into what amounted to two final League deciders with Lochs in 2016 and 2015.

Opportunities like tonight don't come round that often (unless you play for Lochs or Avoch!). Younger players might believe the Devil's promise, "*Well, there'll always be next year*". True, but only for a select few. The only sad aspect to this evening of triumph is that the vast crowd who turned out specially for this "*celebration*" might have gone away, thinking, "*What's all the fuss about? This?*", unaware that this was an atypical performance. Unlike Cups, of course, Leagues are won over campaigns, most of which tonight's attendees have missed, and the march to the title has been exhilarating, and a true learning experience for the younger players.

After opening-game misery, the abject 0-6 defeat at Barvas, the Blues have ground out two 3-2 wins over the Bacachs; two draining triumphs over the reigning Champions, Lochs, 3-2 (a) and 2-1 (h); two backs-to-the wall victories over Point, 2-0 (a), and the Siarachs, 4-2 (h); three romps over Ness, 6-2 (a) and 4-1 (h), and United, 4-0 (h); and secured a last-gasp point against Athletic, 3-3 (h).

Forget tonight. The team has grown in the course of the season: the arrival of "Tago" added power and drive to Mackay in midfield; a fit-again Crossley continued and enhanced the imaginative creativity of Billy Anderson and Eachainn Miller to utilize this power effectively, and the late arrival of Angus Grant provided the deadly finishing to augment "Dokus" and "Gochan" in racking up the points.

The season has also showcased rock-fast defence from Beaton, Craigie, "Tiger", "D.I.", and "Laxay" and witnessed the developing maturity of the next generation of stars: Callum "Beag", Armstrong, and Jordan M., while a strong cast waits patiently on the side-lines for their moment: "Lanky", Stuart "Gochan", Matthew Murray, Andrew Macleod, Jake Macleod, Ben Smith, and Sven Wiltshire. Congratulations, Carloway!

**Carloway Man of the Match: Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur.**

**Point Man of the Match: Elliot Rudall.**

N.B. A special mention for Alex Macdonald, whose dead-ball delivery tonight was excellent and clearly marked him out as Dan Crossley's and "Dokus's" rival for the title of "Best dead-ball kicker on the island since Gary Macleod (Athletic and Carloway), Gordon "Tago" Macdonald (Carloway), and Donnie Macphail (Carloway and Athletic)".