

Lewis and Harris League:

Stornoway United 2 (2) Carloway 3 (2)

*Kenneth Macsween 1 min. 35 secs.
Hamish Macdonald 41*

*Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald 44
Andrew "Tago" Maciver 45, 52*

*At Goathill Park, Stornoway.
Friday, 25th August, 2017. 6.30 p.m.*

*Referee: Kenneth "Bugsy" Smith.
United line judge:
Carloway line judge: Calum "Cobby" Macleod.*

CARLOWAY: 4-5-1.

*Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.
Asst. Managers: Domhnall Mackay; Iain Angus "Gus" Maciver.*

*Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie
Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Ali "Laxay" Macdonald Gordon "Tago"
Macdonald ■
Jordan Macleod Callum "Beag" Mackay Dan Crossley Billy Anderson Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald
Andrew "Tago" Maciver*

*Sub. used: Ben Smith (Gordon "Tago" Macdonald) 77.
Subs. not used: Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald; Andrew Macleod; Stuart "Gochan" Macleod.
Yellow card: Gordon "Tago" Macdonald (persistent foul play) 55.*

UNITED: 4-4-2

Manager: Grant Hunter.

*Stuart MacLennan Hamish MacDonald
Kyle Munro Kevin Flower Kenneth Macsween Finlay Macsween
Bradley Cooper Shaun Macleod Chris Dempster David Allan Macmillan
Jack MacLennan*

Subs. used: James Macaulay (Bradley Cooper) 45; Andy Campbell (Stuart MacLennan) 65; Stephen Morrison (Kyle Munro) 71.

So the long and winding road really led to Goathill, not a loved one's door? Tonight featured the final League fixture of an astonishing campaign which somewhere along the line metamorphosed from "*a long day's journey into night*" into "*one paved with yellow bricks*".

How did this happen? Retrospective analysis is never simple, but certainly doggedness, past experience, and a refusal to submit in the face of adversity figured highly and, most likely, delivered more points than panache and style did: two goals in the last six minutes of a bruising encounter at Creagan Dubh snatched a 3-2 victory; at Cnoc a' Choilich, a last-minute "Tago" equalizer versus Athletic and a 92nd "Dokus" winner against Lochs did the trick; stunning backs-against-the-wall wins were ground out over West Side and Point; and so on. Dan Crossley's, Eachainn Miller's and Billy Anderson's creative imagination cannot be ignored, either. They all contributed to a much less heralded passage to Championship success than the nerve-jangling, anxiety-ridden triumph of 2013. Or maybe simply doing something the first time is much more memorable in any individual's perception of past events. Does anyone really care? A trophy in the boardroom is what matters, and that is what is recorded in the history books, not how we all "*felt*"

about it.

Tonight, for only the second time this season, the Wasps were the opponents, the first occasion being a 4-0 canter for the Blues at Cnoc a' Choilich in mid-June, courtesy of the "Tagos", Domhnall Mackay, and Eachainn Miller. On paper the fixture looked like another day-at-the-office for na Gormaich, against a side lying second bottom in the League who had conceded more goals than any other island side. But then United's fighting draw at Barvas came to mind, plus the embarrassing finalé to last season's fixture between the sides here.

Granted, that night, lack of player availability had necessitated a makeshift side taking the field, and though the Blues had taken an early second half lead through "Laxay", a combination of unfortunate circumstances had led to ignominious defeat: an unfocussed Vigurs (euphemism alert !!!) had to be substituted in the first half; "D.I." had seen red with 20 minutes to go; Lewis "Preston" Robinson converted a penalty after being unnecessarily bundled by "Tiger"; and a deflection allowed Hamish Macdonald to deliver the killer blow with five minutes to go.

Tonight the only absentee was Joe Armstrong (at a music festival), but, mindful that this was "D.I.'s" favourite venue to pick up cards, and knowing that one more yellow card would rule him out of the Coop Cup Final, he was rested, and Domhnall Mackay partnered Ali "Laxay" Macdonald in central defence, with Billy Anderson replacing the captain in midfield.

The setting sun and light breeze provided the ideal night for a game of football - even the midges had arrived in busloads and vastly outnumbered the few spectators lost in this mighty stadium. Hopefully they arrived early as the home side stunned the Blues with an immediate strike. From the kick-off, the Blues lost the ball within the Wasps' half and Munro punted the ball forward to the right. The covering Mackay got to it but his slip to Gordon "Tago" was read by Macsween, "Tago" stumbled, and interplay between Macsween and Flower sent the wing-man clear down their right. Twenty metres from the bye-line he cut across an inviting low diagonal which escaped the retreating line and reached Cooper coming in on the left edge of the box. He immediately steered a low, well-placed shot to the left of the covering Craigie but Mackay got back to stop the ball on the line. Before he could make up his mind how to react, Macsween came crashing in on him to force the ball home (**1-0**).

Carloway didn't panic. They restarted in their favoured style, calmly building from the back, the ball to Anderson or Crossley, then the sudden burst or breaker, and in the next five minutes they had two excellent chances to equalize. In 3 minutes a headed clearance by Mackay found Crossley in the centre and swift interplay with Anderson sent him racing off into the United half, past one, then two defenders. As Macleod tackled him on the edge of the box, the ball ricocheted back off Crossley and behind the defender, leaving the Carloway man one-on-one with the arriving MacIennan. However, his flick from 8 metres to the keeper's left was read by MacIennan and blocked away. Two minutes later a Crossley feed in the centre circle allowed Anderson to play a divine diagonal rightwards behind Macmillan for Macleod to steam forward and cut into the box. As Macleod and Dempster closed him off, 12 metres from goal, he side-stepped both to the left but his right-foot stab to

Maclennan's left was anticipated and blocked for a corner.

It was the 22nd minute before the Blues threatened again, breaking out of defence on the left, with Mackay finding Gordon "Tago", who immediately transferred the ball inwards to Callum "Beag" on the centre-line. The young star took off like lightning past Flower and zoomed into the left of the Wasps' half, before transferring the ball square inwards to "Pongo", 22 metres from goal. The striker managed to hold off Dempster as he entered the box, but as Maclennan rushed out, he flicked the ball to his left - but well-wide of the far post. In 30 minutes another chance went begging. Mackay found Anderson in the centre circle, and he switched the ball right to Callum "Beag", moving forward. He in turn played the ball forward to "Pongo", midway within the right of the United half. As he moved into the box, he half-lost the ball to Macmillan, won it back, then slipped it across to Macleod, 10 metres out in front of goal, but again the Wasps' goalie was out like a flash to block his shot away to safety.

Four minutes later na Gormaich almost paid for their profligacy, when a Macsween free-kick on the United right, 20 metres from the bye-line, escaped everyone as it flew diagonally across goal. Macdonald, lurking 12 metres out by the far post, whacked it first-time but pulled his shot two metres wide of "Van Der Sar's" right-hand post. The Blues replied five minutes later when another Charlie Gallagher from Anderson in the centre circle freed "Pongo" down the right. He cut in across the box, but his right-foot attempt from 18 metres was parried away for a corner by Maclennan to his right.

In 41 minutes Carloway suddenly found themselves looking into the abyss. The ball was played back to "Laxay", the last man, and he tried to sidestep Macdonald to his left on the edge of the box. However, the young striker read him, and as they tussled for the ball, forced it behind the defender, who stumbled and fell. As Craigie came, Macdonald did not delay but fired a perfect low right-foot rocket to his right and deep inside the Blues' right-hand post (**2-0**).

Wow! Follow that! And na Gormaich did, in 44 minutes, storming out of their own area, as Mackay fed Anderson who in turn whipped the ball straight forward to Macleod, moving to the edge of the box, one-on-one with Shaun Macleod. On the edge of the box, he veered right, but Macleod managed to block the ball with his foot. Nevertheless, "Dokus", following up, sent an instant right-foot screamer whizzing wide of Maclennan and just inside his left-hand post (**2-1**).

A minute later, they were level. A Mackay/Anderson/Crossley move saw "Raymondo" one-two with Callum "Beag" before racing out of the left of the Carloway half like a greyhound, outstripping one-two-three attempted tackles as he sped into the left of the Wasps' box. Twelve metres from goal, he squared the ball to "Pongo" directly in front of goal, and he immediately swept a left-foot side-footer high into the net to Maclennan's left (**2-2**).

Half-time: Stornoway United 2 Carloway 2

The ease with which Carloway had thumped in two goals in the closing four minutes of the half was in stark contrast with the catalogue of missed chances throughout the preceding 41. Pace and simplicity had delivered what studied build-up and

casual finishing had not. The game was now finely balanced, Carloway controlling the midfield and continually pushing, but vulnerable at the back, especially on their left. Once again, "Laxay" seemed unsettled without "D.I." and Armstrong. Mackay continually alternated between stout defender and attacking midfielder, while Gordon "Tago" tended to lie in the left half/wing position, with "Laxay" caught between, covering both.

However, it all became a little easier in 52 minutes when a Gordon "Tago" corner from the Blues' right dropped perfectly for "Pongo", 10 metres from goal in the centre, and his first-time right-foot volley flashed home, low inside United's right-hand post (2-3).

United tried to respond immediately, when a Flower free-kick from midway within the Blues' half on the right came over high in the centre, broke onwards off a couple of heads, and was met early by Macdonald, 16 metres out by the far post, but his right-foot blast soared high over Craigie's bar.

In 65 minutes Mackay broke up a United surge, then forced his way forward at speed, finding Anderson in front of him, and the midfielder immediately turned and sent powerful Jimmy McIlroy behind Macmillan for Macleod to chase and carry to the bye-line. He then cut back a high cross which found Mackay, who had continued his run, racing into the centre of the box, but his bullet-like header whizzed a foot outside Macleod's right-hand post.

Seven minutes later another chance to kill it arrived when Mackay and Anderson combined to find Crossley on the right centre-line. Moving forward, swift interplay with Callum "Beag" allowed him to make midway within the United half. He then sent over an inviting diagonal across the heads of Macleod and Dempster for Gordon "Tago" to race into the left of the box behind Macsween, but his left-foot drive from 16 metres went up like a balloon. The resulting goal-kick was headed straight back by Mackay to Anderson in the centre circle and he turned and sent a glorious breaker between Dempster and Macmillan for Macleod to power his way into the box. However, his early low strike from 18 metres was blocked brilliantly by the advancing Macleod, then broke rightwards straight to the arriving "Pongo" in the centre. Macleod managed to throw himself in front of the attempted conversion, and the ball spun away to safety.

Immediately Carloway attacked again through the middle and a free-kick in the centre circle was fired forward early by Anderson but Macleod saw the danger and raced to the edge of his box to fist away.

In 77 minutes United finally managed to get forward, when the Carloway defence failed to clear a high ball into the box cleanly. The ball bobbed back and forth 18 metres from goal before Macleod managed to get a clear strike at it, but his left-foot effort was wildly miscued and the ball disappeared at high speed towards Melbost. Two minutes later, the Wasps came closer, when Flower, moving into the right of the Blues' half, supplied Macdonald, running diagonally inwards across the line. He evaded two tackles and then, 20 metres from goal in the centre, smacked a right-footer which flashed a metre wide of "Van Der Sar's" right hand bar and post. The Stornoway men's final hurrah came in 83 minutes when a corner from their left

was headed onwards to the right by Crossley on the penalty spot. Dempster then returned a low, squared ball into the area which Macdonald met first-time but his effort cleared the central bar by a foot.

A short goal-kick was sent to "Tiger" on the right and he played the ball forwards and inwards to Crossley who took off on one of his trade-mark runs downfield. Midway within the United half, he played the ball rightwards to "Tiger" racing along the touch-line and he made sixteen metres from the bye-line, before forcing his way inwards past Macmillan. He then cut the ball square across to the unmarked "Pongo", lurking unmarked in the centre, but the striker's immediate low right-foot sweep somehow crept a metre wide of the helpless Maclennan's right-hand post.

Full-time: Stornoway United 2 (2) Carloway 3 (2)

Tonight was the type of performance typical of the late-season Blues, a victory achieved mainly through sweat, commitment, and industry, illuminated by the pace of Macleod, Callum "Beag", and Crossley and also the sudden inspired blasts of imagination and creativity of Crossley and Anderson which bewildered their opponents and presented multiple opportunities. Of course, the machine occasionally splutters, but despite going 2-down after 41 minutes, the measure of the side's team morale, its backbone if you like, was seen instantly. No doubt the team would have fared better if the usual back-line had featured, but lack of sharpness in front of goal may be more of a concern in the Coop Cup Final.

Stornoway United Man of the Match: Jack Maclennan.

Carloway Man of the Match: Billy Anderson.