

Cuach a' Choop Cup Final:

## **Westside 3 (1) Carloway 0 (0)**

*Duncan Maclean 6*

*Martainn Shields 66*

*Innes Iain Morrison 90+1*

*At Creagan Dubh, Leurbost.*

*Saturday, 9th September, 2017, 18.00.*

*Referee: Neil Macritchie (Carloway).*

*Stand-side line judge: Calum "Chancy" Macleod.*

*Far-side line judge: Kenneth "Bugsy" Smith.*

**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.) Donald "D.I." MacIennan Joe Armstrong ■*

*Jordan Macleod ■ Callum "Beag" Mackay Dan Crossley Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald ■*

*Kevin "Gochan" Macleod*

*Angus Grant*

*Subs. used: Archie MacDonald (Kevin "Gochan" Macleod) 45, ■; Neil Sinclair (Jordan Macleod) 64; Ben Smith (Callum "Beag" Mackay) 89.*

*Subs. not used: David Beaton; Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald.*

*Yellow cards: Jordan Macleod (late challenge) 23; Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (professional foul) 42; Joe Armstrong (professional foul) 74; Archie MacDonald (late challenge) 83.*

**WESTSIDE:** 4-4-2.

*Manager: "Murchadh" Macdonald.*

*Asst. Manager: Alex "Nibble" Matheson.*

*Dan Macphail ■ Innes Iain Morrison ■*

*Alex John Morrison Scott Graham Robert Shirkie Martainn Shields*

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

*David "Lurch" Murray*

*Subs. used: Lewis "Preston" Robinson (Dan Macphail) 76; Duncan Shirkie (Martainn Shields) 89; Sam Mackay (Innes Iain Morrison) 90+2*

*Subs. not used: Iain Gillies; Johnnie Wallace.*

*Yellow cards: Donnie "Noe" Smith (professional foul) 48; Dan Macphail (persistent fouling) 55; Gordon Campbell (late challenge) 61; Innes Iain Morrison (professional foul) 88.*

Goathill! Oops - Creagan Dubh! Sorry! Apparently the sphagnum moor that passes for Lewis's finest was unplayable yet again so 2017's final frontier was to be in sunny Leurbost!!! Why not have the two west coast challengers draw lots to see whether Cnoc a' Choilich or Barvas could stage this spectacle? Not to worry. A reasonable crowd decamped eastwards to suffer in support of their heroes, accompanied by storm clouds, permanent drizzle, and the usual Biblical plague of midges, although it appeared a significant minority had opted instead for Stoke City v. Man, Utd. on BT Sport.

It was only the Blues' second visit to Creagan Dubh this year, the first being early last May when a shell-shocked Carloway recovered admirably from three sound thumpings by today's opponents to record their first League

victory of the season, 3-2, all the goals coming in the second half. Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald had given a committed Blues' side an early lead before Ross Allison and Robert Mackenzie drove the Maroons ahead with twenty minutes to go. However, twin strikes in the last seven minutes from Domhnall Mackay (via the penalty spot) and Archie MacDonald then kick-started Carloway's season-long rollercoaster ride to a second glorious Championship.

Hopefully, memories of that victory would outweigh those of recurrent misery in the Cuach a' Coop. Na Gormaich's first Final appearance, in late August 2010, was a textbook illustration of the Mourinho maxim: running, possession and territory count for zilch, without firepower. Carloway huffed and puffed throughout while the Siarachs repelled, then played around and over them, to lead 3-0 by the 73rd minute. A late Calum Tom Moody header was simply not enough.

Carloway's solitary success in this competition followed, with the ground-breaking victory in September 2012 at Garrabost, when Darren Mackinnon's penalty shoot-out conversion ended na Gormaich's 55-year quest for silverware, by clinching a 7-6 penalty shoot-out win over Back, after the sides' 1-1 draw in normal time. However, Coop Cup Final misery soon returned, in 2014, when the Siarachs once again outwitted a battling Carloway 0-2, with two sparkling strikes from Ali "Barvas" Macleod.

So, to tonight and the good news: 15-goal-machine, Angus Grant, was back on the island and replaced Denver-departed Andrew "Tago" Maciver up front, giving him the opportunity to establish himself as 2017 Top Scorer. Not bad at all, in what would be 11 starts. Joe Armstrong was available again to plug the hole at left-back, while the erst-suspended Donald "D.I." MacIennan returned in central defence. Unfortunately, defensive mainstay, Ali "Laxay" Macdonald, was otherwise engaged, while midfield *animateur*, Billy Anderson, a major creative influence in the United game (and others), was unable to provide support in the engine room for Dan Crossley. This required Domhnall Mackay to remain in central defence and "Dokus" to fill Anderson's spot in left midfield. Kevin "Gochan" Macleod entered on the left to test Gordon Campbell while the pacy enthusiasm of Jordan Macleod and Callum "Beag" Mackay was set against Duncan Maclean and Euan Shirkie on the right.

The bench welcomed the return to action of Archie MacDonald, out with injury since the victory over Barra on 10th June at Lionacleit in this Cup; the debutant Neil Sinclair (ex-Barra); plus David Beaton; Ben Smith, and Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald.

Carloway opened brightly enough, spreading well, and pushing the Siarachs back as they played la Liga-style, across the line and back and across, etc., looking for an opening break on either wing, especially leftwards, where "Gochan" looked hot. However, with both wing-men lying deep to receive on either touch-line, it meant a whole half had to be covered to make a telling cross. Perhaps, this was the tactic: to pressure Campbell and Maclean wide for pace. Similarly, Martainn Shields started on the right, intent on testing

Armstrong, while Alex John Morrison was set against the more combative "Tiger". None of the four backs had a very comfortable time, initially. Then, suddenly, on 6 minutes, the game became very interesting. A loose ball midway within the West half allowed Graham and Shirkie to combine to find Macphail moving leftwards within the Carloway half. He sent Innes Iain in on the left of the Blues' goal but his strike from 20 metres cannoned off "D.I." for a corner on the Carloway right. The corner came in low to dip by the near post where Maclean flicked it inwards from 8 metres. It seemed to deflect upwards off a couple of limbs before squeezing into Craigie's goal, just inside his right-hand post (1-0).

Na Gormaich did not deviate from their earlier approach, despite no chinks appearing in the opposition defence. Indeed, the opportunities started to appear more and more at the other end, as West broke at pace, pressured the backs, and opened up the centre. Macphail and Innes Iain roamed free, supported by Graham and Shirkie, while Shields continually came at Armstrong at pace. In 16 minutes, the wing-man was supplied by Campbell to outpace the back to the bye-line but Crossley got back sharpish to block his cross for a corner at the near post.

Four minutes later Carloway finally got a sight of "Lurch" when Mackay won the ball in the centre circle, supplied "Dokus" moving into the left of the Siarach half and he in turn found Crossley moving forward in the centre, but his early drive from 20 metres ended up in the Minch. In 22 minutes na Gormaich went closer when a Morrison cross from the touch-line, midway within the Carloway half on their right, was headed on by "D.I." leftwards. Armstrong won the ball and broke down the left, eventually finding "Gochan" in front of him. He took off past Campbell on his right and made the bye-line but his squared low cross was knocked away for a corner at the near post by "Noe". "Dokus" delivered a trademark cross, high and nasty across the face of goal, 6 metres out, but "Lurch" managed to get a heavy palm to the ball and knock it onwards to safety.

As the half-hour approached, it was clear West were winning in midfield, as Carloway relied on individual cameos to counter the experience of Graham and initiate any break-through while the ingenuity of Innes Iain exploited a loose uncertainty in the centre of the Blues' defence and Alex John and Shields dragged the line wide. In 28 minutes another lost ball just inside the West half saw Graham play the early ball forward past Mackay, wide of "D.I.", to find Macphail and Innes Iain racing in unchecked on goal behind the line. Luckily, the striker didn't realise how much time he had and struck a low right-footer wide of the advancing keeper from 20 metres, but well-wide of the far post. Three minutes later a push by Campbell, off "Noe", let him play the ball forward in front of a speeding Shields to enable him to whiz past Armstrong down the right. Eighteen metres from the bye-line he cracked across a nasty, low right-footer, which ricocheted off Crossley and Morrison outwards to Macphail in the centre, 20 metres from goal. His immediate snapshot right-foot drive thwacked the centre of "Van Der Sar's" bar and was scrambled clear.

As Carloway wobbled, the Morrisons combined on the left centre-line to send Graham forward into the Blues' box, but his low drive from 16 metres was read by Craigie, low to his right. A minute later Carloway did reply, but "Dokus's" carefully-struck free-kick from 24 metres in the centre was 2-3 metres outside West's left-hand post.

Two minutes later, normal service was resumed when Maclean found Alex John moving down the left to confront "Tiger". Midway within the half, on the left touch-line, he checked *á la* "Dokus" then sent a low dipping diagonal into the centre of the box, around the penalty spot. In the ensuing scramble, the ball broke off Mackay as he tackled Morrison, then "D.I." as he confronted Macphail, before Armstrong booted the ball to Cameron Terrace for a corner. In 43 minutes another escape arrived when a scintillating run by Alex John down the left, supplied by Innes Iain, saw him send across a high searching cross towards the far post which the arriving Graham managed to meet i but his downward header was well-anticipated by Craigie at the near post.

### **Half-time: Westside 1 Carloway 0**

No doubt the half-time whistle did not arrive soon enough for the Blues, giving them time to assess the deteriorating situation and recalibrate. Central defence was a fundamental problem: without adamantine lynch-pin, Ali "Laxay" Macdonald, it lacked a coherent solidity, with Mackay attempting to combine the roles of central defender and attacking midfielder, while "D.I." tried to cover all the bases, especially left where Armstrong was under constant pressure from Shields. On the right, Alex John constantly enticed "Tiger" forward, to come at him suddenly and run or check and cross unexpectedly. Central midfield was weak, with Dan Crossley gravitating to the holding midfielder position, allowing Graham and Shirkie to control the centre. Callum "Beag" and "Dokus", in turn, were continually forced wide, all of this making it difficult to supply the pace of Grant forward or Macleod wide on the right. After a promising start, "Gochan" had disappeared, permitting Gordon Campbell to reincarnate Javier Zanetta on the right in support of Shields, leaving Joe A. at times overwhelmed.

"Windy" bit the bullet and Archie MacDonald replaced the out-of-sorts "Gochan", entering on left midfield with "Dokus" moving left. It did create a stalemate for a quarter-of-an-hour as the combative Uibhisteach rallied Crossley and "Beag" against Graham *et al*, but soon the Siarachs re-asserted themselves.

A break in 58 minutes saw Shields threaten on the right, then veer inwards 20 metres from goal. An attempted strike broke onwards to Morrison, who switched it back to the right to Campbell, who had continued his run towards the bye-line. He checked back, 20 metres from the line, before sending in a head-high diagonal across goal. An unmarked Alex John came in by the far post, but he had to lean downwards to head the ball, 12 metres from goal, and he miscued and the ball sped onwards well beyond the post.

Carloway tried to strengthen their midfield further with Sinclair replacing

Macleod, but in 65 minutes the Siarachs again surged, with Morrison sending Alex John racing down the left, outside "Tiger". Ten metres in, and 22 from the bye-line, he checked and, as "Tiger" lunged, whipped across a vicious low diagonal, which just eluded a racing Shields in the centre and a diving Macphail by the back post. However, the Blues lost the ball immediately from the goal-kick in the centre circle and Graham got it forward instantly, diagonally left to Alex John, who made the bye-line, 12 metres from Craigie's right-hand post. As "Tiger" and Mackay approached, the young star cut the ball back to the unmarked Shields in the centre, 12 metres from goal, and he had the simplest of tasks in sweeping the ball home past a helpless keeper (2-0).

The game was effectively over, but West still pressed and four minutes later, the beleaguered Blues enjoyed an amazing escape. Midway within the Carloway half a misunderstanding between "Dokus" and Armstrong allowed Graham to fire the ball forward to Macphail breaking into the right of the box. As Craigie rushed out, the striker turned leftwards and whacked the ball goal-wards, but "Van Der Sar" managed to get across to block him. The ball came back to Macphail and he connected again fiercely with his left-foot, but again Craigie blocked. The ball spun high to the keeper's right and Innes Iain, on the penalty spot, cracked it first-time. Again the ball spun high, off "D.I." and Crossley, this time goal-wards but Mackay managed to get across to his left to boot it clear a metre from the goal-line.

However, it still wasn't over yet for the under-pressure Blues. In 77 minutes Alex John was free again, supplied by Smith, midway within the Blues' half on the left touch-line, and his perfect low diagonal forward allowed Graham to race into the left of the Carloway box. However, Craigie was out once more like lightning to block his low drive from 16 metres. As the ball spun away low, Graham followed up to trap the ball on the bye-line, then flash a low ball across goal, 10 metres out, but there were no takers.

As the referee checked his watch, there was a final turn of the knife in the wound from the Siarachs. Ben Smith was unable to control an Armstrong headed clearance in added-on time and the ball came to Innes Iain, just inside the Carloway half on the right, and he lofted a high ball, straight forward. A disinterested Craigie, no doubt thinking about his supper by now, saw the soaring ball at the last minute and as he stepped back, could only flap an outstretched hand at it, like an Indian traffic policeman, before it dropped over his head and under the bar for number three (3-0).

**Full-time: Westside 3 (1) Carloway 0**

Perhaps Carloway's season should have ended on Friday 25th last month, around 8.15 p.m., and this would have kept their aficionados' thoughts warm and happy over the winter to next April. Tonight was rather a sad ending to a thrilling, fulfilling campaign. The fans did not have to look hard for reasons for a less-than-gripping display. "Laxay" and "D.I." have become such a fundamental defensive partnership in a successful Carloway machine that when one or other of them is absent, its watertight solidity seems to

disappear and uncertainty is the rule, despite the Gneissian commitment of Domhnall Mackay, the usual replacement in defence. Naturally, this anxiety spreads to "Tiger" and Joe A. and *who does what?* starts to be the rule. Innes Iain just loved the freedom this looseness gave him, while Shields and Alex John tuned in immediately to the vulnerability of the backs.

Despite Mackay's wish to come forward, however, in support of the midfield, central midfield remained weak, with Dan Crossley, sensing the unease behind him, gravitating towards the holding midfielder position, allowing Graham and Shirkie a largely untrammelled control of the centre. Callum "Beag" and "Dokus" were pushed wide and with little forward fluidity, a withdrawn Crossley and no Billy Anderson, Angus Grant and Jordan Macleod could well have stayed in the club-house as few breaking diagonals freed Jordan M. or "Gochan" wide, or forward passes split "Noe" and Shirkie for Grant to run on to and capitalize. Most balls that did reach them found them deep in search of the ball on the wrong side of their markers, usually facing Craigie. "Lurch" had plenty of time to get his blog up to date.

Perhaps, hunger also played a part tonight as West quite clearly displayed an aggression and desire that seemed absent from their opponents, who already had the League and EaF in the boardroom. Probably they were hugely motivated to end a season that had promised so much with something to show for it. It's hard to figure, from the outside, why it all slipped away from the Siarachs this season, as in all their five fixtures against their rivals this season, even the League defeat at Cnoc a' Choilich which more or less settled the Championship's destination, they've looked the better side; more secure in themselves, more sure of their purpose.

Anyway, a chance for the aching bones to recover from a gruelling season which has been exhilarating and nail-biting in equal measure, euphoric often, depressing occasionally, but, overall, a success. *Adios muchachos* till April, 2018!!!

**Carlaway Man of the Match: Gordon "Van Der Sar" Craigie.**

**Westside Man of the Match: Innes Iain Morrison.**