

Lewis and Harris League:

Point 4 (1) Carloway 1 (1)

Ally "Wally" Maciver 26,63 Callum Masson 2

Cammy Nicolson 63

Elliot Rudall 82

At Garrabost, Point

Monday 16th April 2018, 18:30

Referee: Calum "Chancey" Macleod

Point line judge: Willie Macaulay

Carloway line judge: Calum "Cobby" Macleod

CARLOWAY: 4-5-1.

Manager: Graeme "Windy" Miller.

Asst. Managers: Domhnall Mackay; Iain Angus "Gus" Maciver.

Gordon Craigie ■

*Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Domhnall Mackay (capt.) ■ Archie MacDonald Joe Armstrong
Callum Masson Andy "Bernera" Morrison Stuart "Bubble" MacDonald Lee Johnson Kenny
"Dokus" MacDonald*

Neil Sinclair

Sub. used: Callum "Beag" Mackay (Lee Johnson) 46; Murdo "Squegg" Macleod (Andy "Bernera" Morrison) 73; Matthew Murray (Callum Masson) 87.

Sub. not used: Andrew "Lanky" Macdonald.

Yellow cards: Archie MacDonald (dissent) 90+1; Gordon Craigie (unsporting behaviour/ dissent) 90+2; Domhnall Mackay (unsporting behaviour/ dissent) 90+2.

POINT: 4-4-1-1

Manager: Angus "Stoodie" Mackay

Stewart Munro

Ally "Wally" Maciver

Cammy Nicolson Robert Jones Elliot Rudall ■ Hugh Morrison

Stuart McPhee Iain "Macca" Mackenzie Ali Gillies (capt.) Martyn Lightbody

John Allan Macleod

Subs. used: Sean Macmillan (Martyn Lightbody) 55; Daniel Macleod (Cammy Nicolson) 83; Andrew Mackay (Hugh Morrison) 83.

Yellow card: Elliot Rudall (unsporting behaviour) 90+2.

After Friday the 6th's disappointment, and lack of luck, in the ABC, the Blues had now to focus on retaining the one trophy they excelled themselves in last season - the League Championship. From unlikely beginnings - and that is being euphemistic (a 0-6 thrashing at Barvas) - na Gormaich then surged forward in exhilarating fashion through the following 13 League fixtures without defeat, securing the title last August at Cnoc a' Choilich against tonight's opponents after the Rubhachs' last-minute "equalizer" was, rather fortunately, ruled out.

Defending, or retaining, a trophy can sometimes be more difficult than winning it and Carloway have yet to master this art. Garrabost would be unlikely to be the venue of choice to begin this defence, however, despite success here, twice, in 2017. In the

mid-May League game, two Andrew "Tago" Maciver stunners had left "Gordie" clutching space, while an Angus Grant hat-trick (the first in 65 seconds) and Dan Crossley double had left Ally Lamont unhappy in a 5-2 EaF mauling. Unfortunately, all three scorers no longer featured: "Tago", of course, is in Colorado; Grant on the mainland with Turriff United; and "Raymondo" has decided to take a year out to achieve full fitness.

The Reds themselves have lost Daniel Macleod and Matthew Campbell to the mainland, and Alfie Macmillan has gone to United; Angus Macdonald also, so decisive a figure on-field, will miss the first two months of the season due to university, while the unluckiest man in the League, Andrew Murray, was injured once more. All of this diminishes the League overall, and tonight's contest, of course. Further absences made "Windy's" options even more limited: David Beaton, Billy Anderson, Kenny "Beag" Maclennan, Ben Smith, and Graham "Flossie" MacDonald were unavailable, while Donald "D.I." Maclennan had still not recovered from his ankle injury in the Ness friendly. Therefore, Archie MacDonald once more deputized at the back beside Domhnall Mackay, the oldest fisherman in Lewis slotted in behind him in goal, and Lee Johnson was welcomed back after a year's absence to left-side midfield.

The opposition midfield looked imposing - Morrison, Jones, and the guy the Blues just love to hate, Elliott Rudall - while perennial pains-in-the-posterior, Ally "Wally" Maciver and Stewart Munro fronted the side.

The unseasonal weather continued tonight - or, maybe, this is what now passes for seasonal weather, a howling, icy easterly under a lowering sky, giving the home side the first-half advantage. However, mercifully, the deluge did not begin till after the final whistle. Immediately, the sparse crowd was graced with a return to the explosive starts of 2011, etc. A first minute cross from Lightbody, on the Point right, 24 metres out, was floated in diagonally to the back post. A glancing back-header from Munro carried it over the back-line to "Wally", 10 metres out from Craigie's right-hand post. "Wally" burst past "Tiger" and, as "Van Der Sar" moved towards him, he knocked the ball to his left, but the covering MacDonald managed to sweep the ball off the goal-line to the right.

A second free-kick, 24 metres out in the centre, ran right through to Craigie and he was glad to hoist the ball downfield. It was headed on in the centre circle, breaking forward to Sinclair, inside the box, who managed to knock it rightwards to the advancing Masson, who was blocked by "Macca" to the right but recovered to follow the ball, then whip round to his right to drive it past Macleod from 12 metres (**0-1**).

This inspired a period of Carloway pressure as the pace and insight of Johnson and "Dokus" and commitment and industry of Masson and "Bubble" forced Rudall and Jones on the back-foot but in 9 minutes a quick Morrison throw-in, on the right, just inside his own half, sailed over MacDonald's head for Munro to speed off towards Craigie. Armstrong and Mackay closed on him on the edge of the box, and he slipped the ball square left to "Wally" but Morrison's block spun the ball back to Munro, and he whipped a nasty low left-footer goal-wards. However, "Van Der Sar" had no trouble pushing the ball away to his right. A minute later a "Wally" free-kick from 20 metres in the centre was pushed over by Craigie and the resultant corner

from the Point right was hooked by Rudall, 16 metres out towards the left, to drop dangerously against the base of Carloway's left-hand post before being smothered by the goalie.

As na Gormaich struggled to establish their shape, the Rudhachs came forward yet again in 18 minutes. A grinding tackle on the centre line by Lightbody robbed "Dokus", allowing the full-back to supply "Wally" midway within the Blues' half, but his early right-footer from 20 metres cleared the bar by a foot. A moment later a high clearance found the free-running Maciver again, in the same position, but this time his effort soared over by even more.

Na Gormaich responded with a long-range effort from "Dokus", 24 metres out to the left of goal, but it raced well-wide of Lamont's right-hand post. A minute later a carefully-flighted Mackay lob from the centre circle reached Johnson, breaking free on the left. He checked on the line, then sent a squared high cross to the back post, which was mishit clear by Rudall at the back post. The whirling ball was met on the volley by "Dokus" just inside the centre of the box but was easily held by Macleod, low to his left.

Nevertheless, in 26 minutes "Wally" finally achieved what he had been threatening to do for some time. Rudall won the ball on the left centre-line and supplied "Wally" in front of him, midway within the Carloway half. He bamboozled "Tiger", moved forward, then jinxed right off Mackay effortlessly to snap in a low right-foot daisy-cutter just inside "Van Der Sar's" right-hand post (1-1).

Three minutes it nearly got a lot worse, when Morrison managed to fight off an Armstrong tackle to make the line. His high cross was chested down by Nicolson by the far post, then immediately played square right, but Munro, 16 metres from goal in the centre, couldn't quite get his foot completely on it and it trundled slowly to Craigie's right.

Half-time: Point 1 Carloway 1

Despite a lack of chances, clear-cut or otherwise, there were grounds for optimism among the visitors. The midfield of Masson/"Bubble"/"Dokus"/Johnson had contributed hard, especially when they held the ball and ran. Nevertheless, Sinclair had lacked support to test Gillies and "Macca" for pace on the turn, even though Masson had tried hard to get forward as often as possible on the right flank in support. Mackay and MacDonald had covered each other in the centre but unconfined danger lurked on the flanks where "Tiger" and Armstrong found it difficult to find the correct point to nail their space. Meanwhile, "Wally", lying in the *trequartista* area as a Thomas Muller-type **Raumdeuter**, revelled in the freedom he created for himself between the Blues' lines and his opponents' inability to read him. However, na Gormaich's game-plan was immediately compromised when Johnson appeared to pull a hamstring straightaway as he surged forward and was replaced by Callum "Beag" Mackay in a straight swop.

The balance of the game clearly altered as Morrison/Jones/Rudall took advantage of Carloway's tentative attempts to recalibrate and gained a tight hold in the middle of the park. In 55 minutes Maciver again reprised his first-half play as he gathered a ball from Jones just outside the right of the box, shimmied off "Tiger", then sent a

right-footer a metre over Craigie's right-hand bar. Four minutes later two "Wally" corners from the Point left led to Gillies in the centre, 10 metres out, heading the ball hard against the face of the bar, then the rebound being met by "Macca", who hit the bar again, under pressure from Mackay. The ball broke clear and from the mêlée was scrambled away to the Carloway right, before being whipped back square by Jones, low and hard across goal, 10 metres from the line, but, amazingly, no one got a touch.

However, in 63 minutes the Rudhachs got the breakthrough they repeatedly threatened, when a 1-2 saw Munro play the racing Lightbody clear behind Armstrong on the right. He found the bye-line before cutting back a sharp low ball across goal which eluded the retreating Armstrong, Mackay, and "Tiger" to reach Nicolson by the far post and he side-footed the ball home from 12 metres (2-1).

Four minutes later the night darkened even further for our heroes when, once again, the free-running "Wally" was supplied by Jones midway within the Carloway half, then Jimmy Johnstoned his way past Armstrong and Mackay rightwards to make the bye-line. Sixteen metres from goal and just in from the line, he flashed a low speculative drive towards goal which eluded Craigie's left foot and somehow entered goal from the sharpest of angles (3-1).

Red faces all round after that as "Squegg" replaced the tiring "Bernera" in an attempt to add solidity and experience to a fragmenting centre-field but the balance of play was beyond recall and in 82 minutes another curious goal arrived. A "Wally" free-kick from 24 metres in the centre was flighted leftwards over a defensive line which failed to cover as Gillies ran in to meet the ball 10 metres from the back post. He managed to side-foot the awkward ball square rightwards to the falling Rudall who somehow hooked it goalwards past Craigie in the centre (4-1).

Full-time: Point 4 (1) Carloway 1 (1)

Tonight, a reasonably competitive first-half performance was swiftly overshadowed by a rapidly degenerating second 45 minutes. Why the sea-change occurred is open to argument. Was it the loss of the pacy, aggressive Johnson? Certainly the midfield suffered with his loss, despite Callum "Beag's" best efforts to link up with Sinclair. The creativity of Jones and certainly the power and commitment of Rudall couldn't be ignored and "Bubble" and Johnson were willing to take them on in the first half, while Masson and "Dokus" repeatedly tried to break forward right and centre. However, the flanks were largely unexploited, as was the lack of pace at the centre of the Point defence. The newness of the formation and personnel might have been the cause.

How best to use Neil Sinclair is still unresolved, as shown by a late misunderstanding between Callum "Beag" and Sinclair which could, potentially, have put the Blues back in the game if the opportunity had been taken. What are his strengths? Does he like the ball over the top to run on to, or wide in front of him? The return of "D.I." would certainly strengthen and settle the back-line, and also release "Statto" wide left or up front to work with Sinclair.

2017's usual back-line also might have been better able to deal with the Don Kichenbrand-figure of Stewart Munro and the elusive Sylvian Wiltord-like "Wally".

Mackay and MacDonald were composed enough to deal with Munro, but the essential freedom of Maciver's assumed role, and his deceptive body moves, created acres of space for himself. He did not seem to be marked, not man-to-man anyway. A further question is: could he be? Probably there was too much else going on to spare a man to do this. Hopefully, most teams, especially North Uist, don't have similar.

A test approaches on Saturday. it's the big one, the HAC, and, hopefully, a full, or fuller, squad will travel and perhaps iron out some of the early teething troubles.

Point Man of the Match: Ally "Wally" Maciver.

Carloway Man of the Match: Stuart "Bubble" MacDonald.