

2013 season review

Stuart Rankin, 25 November 2013 21:58

A sigh of relief deeper than Loch Ness swept through the crofts and townships of Uig District around 7.55 p.m. last August 16th, as Fraser Macleod blasted his 50th goal of the season high into the net to Gordon Craigie's left. At that moment, Carloway's 80-year wait was over. Stumbling defeats in previous League run-ins and boringly predictable Cup Final reverses suddenly became ancient history as the finest squad the Blues have ever assembled delivered early and in exquisite style.

The omens for success had been propitious. Few squad changes from 2012 signalled a settled, strong squad which, when fully-fit and/or available, picked itself. Andrew "Tago" Maciver had departed for Africa, while Donnie "Xavi" Macphail joined Athletic; Gordon "Tago" Macdonald, unfortunately, did not feature and Kenny "Beag" MacIannan and Darren Mackinnon worked/served off the island. However, ace goal-machine, Fraser Macleod, had signed from Back, and Carloway's own force of nature, Scott Macaulay, was again in contention after his leg-break, and able to link with Fraz Mac to create the deadliest strike-duo on Lewis. On paper the starting XI looked Championship material.

And so it was to prove throughout most of the season. Indeed, from the opening of the Blues' League campaign on Friday, 12th April, with a comfortable 4-0 victory at Rally Park, Tarbert, na Gormaich proceeded to set a club record of **THIRTEEN** straight victories in all competitions, battling all the way onwards to Saturday, 1st June, when they were unlucky to lose 2-3 in the Highland Amateur Cup R 3 to cup-holders, Avoch, at Culbokie. Up until that day, they had scored 60 goals and only conceded 6; decisively beaten Lochs, Athletic, and Back, **THE** three teams on the island, to lift their first-ever Acres Boys Club Cup; and overcome old rivals, Westside, 2-1 at Cnoc a' Choilich in a tense head-to-head between two of the early League front-runners.

The reasons for such success were not difficult to decipher. Behind Scott Macaulay and Fraz Mac was an adamant defence and a combative, inventive midfield, capable of repeated permutation. The last line, David Beaton, was the reigning L. & H. Goalkeeper of the Year and rightly so. Before him stood the finest stopper and defence coordinator available, Gus Maciver; on either side of Gus, class itself on the right in Calum Tom Moody (who doubled as the finest header of the ball in Blue) and on the left the ever-dependable, Donald "D.I." MacIannan, now the undisputed first choice in the left-back role. An infinitely adaptable midfield, though generally settled, seemed unshaken by personnel change or tweaks: the usual flanks paired the irrepressible, and at times "*unhandle-able*", Kevin "Gochan" Macleod, on the right, with the Under-21 Player of the Year, Dan Crossley, arguably the most gifted footballer on the Islands, covering the entire left of the field. Any spectator who saw him strike at Fivepenny on 12th July or his cross-field pass to "Gochan" for the first goal against Point in the final League game will agree with this last assessment. The rock in the centre was Captain Courageous, the "water-carrier" - Domhnall "Gennaro" Mackay - while, usually, on either side of him stood Billy "Pirlo" Anderson, deliverer of the killer "golden ball", and Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod, the unsung

"blocker" and "deliverer". Of equal value were another outstanding youth talent, the versatile Seumas Macleod, and the skilful midfield/winger/striker, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, whose late goal-surge was only surpassed by the unique Fraz Mac. In the wings waiting, pushing, were the young bloods: the combative striker, Kevin "Barra" Macneil; dogged defender, Cameron "Tiger" MacArthur; and racing up behind them, Ben Smith, Jack Buchanan, Eachainn Miller, and Ross "Tiny" Maclean.

The gut-wrenching disappointment of late, late defeat at Culbokie did erase the feeling of invincibility which had pervaded Cnoc a' Choilich throughout the first half of the season; cumulative injury and suspensions did not help either. The Blues now did stumble once or twice (what team doesn't?), losing to Lochs, 1-4 in the EaF SF L1, and 4-5 in the Coop Cup SF, then 2-3 to Athletic in the Moldova Lewis SF, all at home. However, a deep-rooted resilience within the squad and visceral desire to prevail soon re-surfaced: in June, a 3-3 League encounter at Garrabost saw na Gormaich claw their way back to a precious point from 1-3 down with goals in the 85th and 97th minutes! And a month later, at Creagan Dubh, in the EaF SF L2, a Dan Crossley-inspired Blues actually stormed into a 3-0 lead after 56 minutes before being pulled back to a 3-3 draw. In this period also their support was to be treated (or subjected!) to two of the defining matches of Carloway's season, indeed, of their history: the home and away League confrontations with reigning Champions, Athletic, which went a considerable way to deciding whose name was eventually inscribed on the Championship shield. As with all tense, perfectly-balanced contests pairing two committed rivals, both clashes turned on a few moments of individual insight and skill. At Cnoc a' Choilich, with eleven minutes left on the clock, a 0-0 draw seemed imminent until a "Squeg" free-kick from the right set up an inviting Moody reverse-header from the far post across goal for Domhnall Mackay to crash into the roof of the net. At Goathill, the Blues didn't have to wait so long for such inspiration. The breakthrough came as early as the eighth minute from "Sqweg" who, without breaking stride, rushed into the left corner of the box to send an exquisite right-foot drive over and round Colin Macritchie and into his top-left corner. However, despite these 0-2 and 0-3 reverses, the Stornoway boys continued the chase doggedly and na Gormaich still had to account for United at Goathill (4-0) and Back at home (3-0) before the curtain rose on the showdown West Lewis derby at Barvas on the 16th August, against a Westside who, arithmetically, still had an outside chance of the title. The Coen brothers could not have scripted a more tense plot-line!

For Carloway diehards, it was very much an "*I know! I was there!*" occasion. Carlowegians from off-island and local Care Homes swelled the ranks of the regulars on the terracing to create an atmosphere as charged as a pulsar's. A tangible undercurrent of nervous dread permeated the Blues' fans, however - not so much, "*What could go wrong?*", as, "*What would go wrong?*". Nevertheless, a committed team performance was to produce once more a moment of instinctive imagination and deliver a decisive victory. After a gripping, first-half stalemate, 1-1, Man-of-the-Match, Seumas Macleod, reacted like lightning on the hour to stab a breaking ball off Gordon Craigie and Fraz Mac past covering defenders and home. The next 20+ minutes seemed to last as long as three lifetimes, before Fraser's explosive Exocet arrived in the 84th minute as a very thick icing on the Championship cake! Spain and the Spanish did not celebrate winning the World Cup more effusively!

Incredibly, four cups and a League Championship had been secured in the space of twelve months by a club who, until a year before, had been unable to win **ANYTHING** for over **50** years. This season alone there were so many firsts: a first-ever League Championship and first-ever unbeaten season in the League; a first ABC Cup; a first Jock Stein Cup; a first Player of the Season Award to a Carloway Player in Dan Crossley; a complete season without an away defeat to an Island team on the islands; a new record number of victories, goals scored, etc., etc., and Fraser Macleod setting a new record of goals (**53**) scored in a season – in the **82nd** minute of the **final** game of the season against Point!

Nearly three months have passed since that night in Barvas but the occasion, and what it represents, still resonates in the minds of the faithful. Such moments should be remembered as long and as clearly as possible; they won't come often. These events are now recorded in the history books and, inevitably, people will soon begin to forget or become confused about detail. Eventually these will become neglected facts in libraries, no longer in living people's memories. The island and its folk must move on, of course, metaphorically and literally: Seumas Macleod already has, to [Glasgow](#); Calum Tom Moody to Lochs; Kevin Anderson to other interests. But the Club and the fans remain and, hopefully, most of us will be around when other seasons arrive to equal this one.