

Jeremy Hall savours move to Toronto FC midfield

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TORONTO -- He may not get many headlines but Jeremy Hall has already become one of the new-look Toronto FC's success stories this season.

Installed in central midfield after spending most of last season at fullback, the 24-year-old from Tampa has earned praise along with winger Reggie Lambe from manager Ryan Nelsen for being "consistent standouts."

"It's ridiculous how many things both those guys do that probably the fans don't see or sometimes the media don't see," Nelsen said this week after practice. "Especially Jeremy. He cleans up a lot.

"He's very uncomplicated ... That's what we've asked him to do and he's doing the job brilliantly well." Hall says his job on the field is simple.

"I just get it (the ball) and give it," he said, referring to the likes of attackers Lambe, Luis Silva, Hogan Ephraim and Robert Earnshaw. "I don't have to dribble through people like that."

But Hall is showing vision of his own. Against Houston last Saturday, he spotted a diagonal run by Earnshaw to find him in the penalty box for a shot that bounced off the crossbar.

Later in the game, Hall scored himself with a deft shift of the ball from his left to right foot to find space for a low shot that beat Tally Hall from outside the penalty area.

He has also looked after the ball.

Against Houston, Hall completed 38 of 45 passes. Earlier this month against FC Dallas, he was good on 56 of 65 passes.

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Hall's role has no doubt been aided by the return to action of Silva, a creative attacking midfielder.

"With his attacking qualities, a lot of teams zone in on him," said Hall. "So with the runs that he makes, it actually creates space for me."

Hall is savouring the challenges of the position, trying to anticipate where the ball will go. After games, he spends times on his laptop, using video analysis software to review his performance.

Having a vocal leader in the back in captain Darren O'Dea helps during the game, he says.

Hall is no stranger to midfielder, having played on the flank during his time with the U.S. under-17 team and the University of Maryland.

Drafted by the New York Red Bulls 11th overall in 2009, Hall was switched to defence by coach Juan Carlos Osorio in the pre-season. New coach Hans Backe moved him to midfield the next season until an injury to a teammate forced him back in defence.

Traded to Portland in November 2010, he spent time in the midfield until he was once again shifted to the backline to fill an injury void.

"This is probably the first time I've actually played midfield throughout the whole season -- and the first time in the centre," said Hall.

Nelsen says he saw Hall as a central midfielder from the first time he set eyes on him during training camp.

"I immediately thought that was his position," he said. "To tell you the truth, I didn't consider him in any other role but that position.

"What's been great about Jeremy is he's grabbed it with both hands and just learned from it and grown from it. I think his performances have just got better and better."

Hall points to the new depth in the squad for the improvement across the board.

"Every position there's competition," he said. "So it makes the training sessions more intense. Everybody's trying to get that starting position.

"That's how you bring the best out of each other. There's times when the second team beats the first team in training and it's because we're so deep and they're good players."

Toronto is Hall's fourth MLS team -- he had a brief stint with FC Dallas before coming to Toronto in August 2011 for Eric Alexander.

There is no apparent baggage. Rarely seen without a smile, Hall is clearly well-liked in the Toronto dressing room. He's not sure why he moved so often and points out that he has played everywhere he went.

"Right now I'm really enjoying my football," he said. "I'm finally healthy which has been a big thing for me. A few of those years, aside from my (2009) rookie season, I picked up injuries here and there, and I was playing hurt. I really wasn't able to play to my ability."

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Hall worked out in the off-season at Tampa's Performance Compound gym, which is home to such baseball stars as Derek Jeter and B.J. Upton.

"The trainers there were amazing so I really got to get a good foundation for myself going into pre-season."

Toronto (1-2-4) hosts the Red Bulls (3-4-2) on Saturday at BMO Field.