



# GEOFF CAMERON

Stoke City's American utility man on his side's exciting season

**G** Geoff Cameron is *that* guy. He is the person at work who downloads the latest hot television shows before they've aired in the UK, and spends the intervening period dropping unsuitable hints and loudly talking about what happens.

"I have my iTunes account in America," says the Boston-bred Stoke City player. "So I get some of the TV shows before the guys. On something like *Homeland* I'm usually one or two episodes ahead of everybody, so if I want to be an asshole I'll spoil it for them."

Stoke City's drastic makeover under Mark Hughes is worthy of its own spoiler tag. The Potters have finished ninth in each of the past two seasons, and sit seventh this time. Their attacking players have caught the eye: flowing football from the likes of Bojan Krkic, Xherdan Shaqiri and Marko Arnautovic has helped claim some notable scalps, including an impressive 2-0 win over Manchester City.

For utility man Cameron, who joined in the more austere days under Tony Pulis, it's been a refreshing change. There's a certain

irony to his words when he describes Stoke's struggles against teams who would have been rivals in previous years.

"Teams are sitting in and defending when they're going to Stoke," says the 30-year-old. "They know what style we play and that the type of players we have can be very creative. They'll sit back and defend and hope to catch us on a counter-attack."

## SENSIBLE SOCCER

Cameron has played all over the pitch for both club and country - he sees his best position as centre-half or defensive midfield, but he spent two years playing at right-back when he first broke into the Stoke side.

"I've kind of moved around because I'm versatile, and I can do whatever the team needs me to do," he says. "I don't mind that, and I can be that player. I'm happy to be that. This season I've played a bunch of games at centre-half and a bunch in centre-midfield, where I can open my game up a bit more and use my legs and athleticism."

**"I played every sport - baseball, basketball, lacrosse, football - but I just fell in love with soccer"**

He grew up admiring the work of defensive midfielders such as Edgar Davids and Gennaro Gattuso - players with "bite". For a young Cameron, however, there wasn't much football available to watch - they might get the latest shows before we do, but until recently the States was not an easy place to be a football fan.

"Growing up, they would show only the top three or four teams," he explains. "Arsenal, Manchester United, Chelsea and Liverpool, and then Juventus, Real Madrid and Barcelona."

Still, despite the lack of exposure on television, he grew up surrounded by the sport.

"It's just a culture I grew up with," says Cameron. "I grew up in a pretty diverse area

- there was a lot of Portuguese and Italians. I played every sport: baseball, basketball, lacrosse, [American] football, but I just fell in love with soccer."

From there, he followed a route that is common across the Atlantic, but relatively rare here: play at high school, scouted by a college team, signed by an MLS club - Houston Dynamo - on a tiny, capped salary and then finally, four and a half years later, the big move to the Premier League. Cameron thinks it has given him a different outlook on success to a lot of players.

"You get a lot of stories of kids that get success really early, at a young age," he says. "And they have so much talent, but once they

second-placed Leicester this weekend, followed by a League Cup semi-final second leg against Liverpool on Tuesday. An FA Cup fourth-round trip to Crystal Palace at the end of January precedes league meetings with Manchester United and Everton.

Cameron points to previous good form at this time of year - a cold, wet afternoon in Stoke remains a powerful ally, even if a few more of the home team are in long sleeves and gloves these days.

"I don't want to jinx it, but we always seem to toughen up and go on a bit of a run," he says. "If we can get some good results, it will kind of set the rest of the season up for us."

So, how far can Stoke go?



**"Teams are getting beaten by teams they shouldn't be losing to, and teams that should be losing are winning. It's been the craziest season I've seen"**

get to a certain level they kind of stop working and stop doing all the things that got them there. I found that, no matter what, you had to keep working, keep grinding every single day, because you don't have many opportunities or many clubs. You start your professional career later, but at the same time it definitely gives you that mental toughness."

## STURDY STOKE

Stoke are still a tough team - they proved that with a 0-0 draw against league leaders Arsenal last weekend, which Cameron missed through injury. Our interview comes at the start of a crucial period of fixtures that could make or break the team's season. They play

"We don't want to get ahead of ourselves," says Cameron. "We're on that path of challenging other clubs. If we get seventh or eighth place it's a successful year, especially with how wide open this season is - teams are getting beaten by teams they shouldn't be losing to, and teams that should be losing are winning. It's been the craziest season I've seen. We're good enough to definitely be up there. Our goal is to finish higher than last year, and push for a Europa League spot."

Surely even Cameron, who has been there throughout Stoke's transformation from set-piece scrappers to stylish passers, couldn't have seen this twist coming. ●

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## This week's fixtures

### SATURDAY

Norwich v Liverpool  
BT Sport 1 12.45pm

A forward line of John Barnes, Ian Rush and Robbie Fowler led Liverpool last time they were overturned by the Canaries, in 1994. The Reds have scored 22 in their past six against Norwich, but rued missed opportunities in defeat to Manchester United.

Crystal Palace v Tottenham, 3pm

Tottenham are the only side to have conceded fewer than 20 times and Crystal Palace are on a five-game winless run in which they have failed to score. Yannick Bolasis's absence has coincided with the drought, so Alan Pardew will hope the Congolese's calf complaint has healed.

Leicester City v Stoke, 3pm

A dramatic comeback at the Britannia Stadium in September to save a 2-2 draw, thanks to goals from Riyad Mahrez and Jamie Vardy, says a lot about the Foxes' spirit this season. They lie second on goal difference, but have not beaten Stoke at home since 2006.

Manchester United v Southampton, 3pm

James Ward-Prowse's dead-ball double sank West Brom to give Saints their second consecutive league victory. While his troublesome hamstring improves, new signing Charlie Austin will not be rushed into action at goal-starved Old Trafford.

Sunderland v Bournemouth, 3pm

Eddie Howe hailed a "perfect afternoon" in the wake of a 3-0 defeat of Norwich. The ease with which Bournemouth overcame their potential relegation rivals suggests Sunderland, four points short of safety and reeling from a 4-1 reverse to Tottenham, have their work cut out.

Watford v Newcastle, 3pm

The manager-player of the month double for Quique Sanchez Flores and Odion Ighalo has foreshadowed a January of three Watford losses. Newcastle new boy Jonjo Shelvey excelled with some exquisite passing in a debut win over West Ham, and still had time to have a crack at Enner Valencia.

West Brom v Aston Villa, 3pm

Having overcome Crystal Palace before holding Leicester to a 1-1 draw, Aston Villa last week demonstrated that they have made progress. They remain, however, six points adrift and have not emerged victorious from a Hawthorns encounter since Gabby Agbonlahor's winner in 2008.

West Ham v Manchester City

Sky Sports 1, 5.30pm TalkSPORT

Excellent counter-attacking saw the Hammers lay siege to the Etihad Stadium four months ago. But even if a 2-1 defeat at Newcastle was a minor hiccup, they must be at their best against a David Silva-inspired Manchester City. Manuel Pellegrini's side have not lost since going down 2-1 to Arsenal in December.

### SUNDAY

Everton v Swansea

Sky Sports 1, 1.30pm TalkSPORT

Just two goals punctuate the previous three meetings between these teams, all of which have been draws. Bryan Oviedo should be fit to return for the Toffees, who are without a win in four league games despite scoring seven goals in that period.

Arsenal v Chelsea

Sky Sports, 4pm

Diego Costa's wind-up tactics led to two Arsenal red cards in a bad-tempered game at Stamford Bridge. Arsene Wenger praised his side for coming through an "old-fashioned battle" at Stoke last weekend. Possible returns for Mesut Ozil and Alexis Sanchez could further boost the Gunners.

sky SPORTS 1

West Ham v Man City Saturday 5pm

sky SPORTS 1 HD

sky SPORTS 1

Arsenal v Chelsea Sunday 3.30pm

sky SPORTS 1 HD