‘Heated Rivalry’ is the steamy hockey romance we deserve

The queer Canadian hockey drama packs heart and heat, setting it apart from other MLM adaptations

By Nash Hurtado • November 28, 2025 1:52 pm EST

As hockey commentators stoke the flames of a bitter rivalry, Shane and Ilya feel things up in secret off the rink. Credit: Courtesy of Crave

It is the canon of gay film and TV, there are near-universal touchstones.

The ostracization or bullying of young boys who don’t fit within the norm. The emergence of one’s authentic or artistic voice on the other end of adolescence. Tearful confessions of love—to peers, parents, teachers or mentors—admitting finally, “This is who I am.”

Such is the arc of gay hits like *Red, White & Royal Blue* and *Love, Simon* is the film world, or shows like *Heartstopper*, Young *Royals* and *Love, Victor*.

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It’s not a fat leap, then, to assume that *Heated Rivalry*—Crave’s love story between two young athletes entering the world of professional hockey—would follow those traditions. Like all of the aforementioned titles, *Heated Rivalry* is based on a book written by a woman (Rachel Reid) and adored among female readers.

Yet the show, kicking off with a two-episode premiere on Nov. 28, is a far cry from its more sentimental, saccharine siblings. Refreshingly so.

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After all, as much as surviving bullies and unrequited crushes are quintessential gay experiences, so too is sticking yourself out to a stranger in the shower, or putting on your clothes to leave some guy’s place mere seconds after swallowing his load. Are these common experiences any less authentically gay? Any less deserving of screen time?

If your answer is no, *Heated Rivalry* is the show for you. Both above examples—and much, much more—take place in the first of six episodes in the series, shared with Xtra ahead of its premiere.

The pilot introduces us to Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), a hockey superstar navigating his senior year in Boston, while trying to expectations of hockey-obsessed Canadian fans and demanding parents. Then there’s Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), a boastful Russian import with the skills on the ice to back up his swagger. The problem: the premiere episode moves at breakneck pace—there are several time-jumps as the boys cross paths at different games, cities, events—it sets up a compelling enemies-to-lovers dynamic.

Heated Rivalry has every ingredient for success: an enemy-to-lovers storyline, a slow-burn romance, a sweeping score (thanks to *White Lotus* or *Game of Thrones*) and stars who fully embody their roles—from Williams’s having confident to bashful on a dime, to Storrie’s comedic cadence and teasing smirk.

The real MVP, however, is writer-director-producer Jacob Tierney. With *Heated Rivalry*, Tierney has turned pulp into premium TV—an adaptation that deserves to be watched, rewatched. The creative team behind projects like *Letterkenny* and *Shoresy* clearly has knack for laugh- and love-infused hockey TV, and in discussing *Heated Rivalry*, it’s clear how much heart Tierney has poured into the series. As proof, one can look to the fact that he DM’d author Reid to get the rights, or the remarkably fast development process in mere two years after that initial outreach, almost unheard of in scripted TV.

To learn more about why Tierney took such a liking to the story, and to hear from its leonine stars, Xtra sat down with Tierney, Williams and Storrie to talk all things *Heated Rivalry*.

Let’s start with expectations. Naturally, hearing that *Heated Rivalry* is based on a book authored by a woman and very popular with women, I assumed it was in a certain vein of other gay romances. Inside, what misconceptions or assumptions were you having when you were pitching and developing *Heated Rivalry*?

Jacob Tierney: I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about romance as a genre, and about women’s tastes, because of inherent misogyny and people’s lack of interest in hearing that interest women. And, you know, romance is an industry that makes a billion dollars a year and yet is wildly unrepresented outside of romance. I think we’re seeing more of it coming into the top, but the misunderstanding of what is and lack of curiosity about things that pleasure women is present.

When you slid into Rachel [Reid's DMs to collaborate on an adaptation of her book, how did you sell your vision? Were there initial pressures you made?

TT: I didn’t even know Rachel was Canadian, so I didn’t have any idea if she was hot any sense of who I was. I’d been a big fan of *Letterkenny*; she was a fan of *Shoresy*. What I told her that I think probably sealed the deal was I wanna take these books seriously. Like, I don’t want to do this as a Hallmark romance. I want to take this seriously and I want to give it six hours, which is a different treatment than I think this genre generally gets.

Hudson and Connor, typically in interviews for romances you’re asked about your “chemistry” together, but I’m curious how intimacy was built, how you kept that disdain and animosity alive in the earlier parts of the story, especially as you were becoming friends off camera.

Hudson Williams (laughs): I secretly hate Connor in real life. So it was very easy.

Connor Storrie: And I love Hudson. So that hurts my feelings.

HW: Easy-peasy. I would say, at least for me, it’s there in the script that Ilya’s not a great communicator by Shane. As an audience member, I can fully justify his actions, I can empathize. But on those days when I’m standing across from him and he says nothing, he communicates so little about what’s going on in his head I have no reason to accept or empathize with his situation. He’s not really extending the olive branch. I found it pretty easy to just get pissed off trying to communicate with him and open up my feelings with Ilya, the character.

CS: Yeah, I feel the same. Our characters are pretty different from us, so once we do look into that, I think that natural friction comes up. But yeah, it’s a really interesting balance because you instantly go from that friction on that extra into romance. It’s bizarre energy. You can turn that into a loving thing, and then you can also turn that into a passionate thing or you can turn that into a disdained thing.

JT: Yeah, it’s just a lot of energy being directed at the other person. And it’s easy to kind of shift that over from humour to animosity to sex to whatever it needs to be.

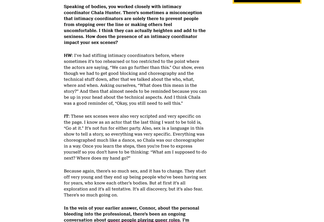
I’m glad you mentioned humour because it’s interesting how many comedic moments there are in the pilot, especially with Ilya. Hudson, is there like an element of playfulness in Shane that you wanted to bring to the character, or was it just the “straight man”-for-lack of a better word-to Ilya's jokes?

HW: I had one of (author) Rachel Reid's friends tell me she found Shane very funny, thank you very much. But yeah, I do agree with you. He's sort of a square, which allows Ilya to be the more charismatic, fun one. The juxtaposition is sort of what drives the story.

CS: Shane gets his laughs later. Yeah, you've got a bunch of funny moments.

CS: Also I would say that there's a difference between laughing at someone and laughing with someone. I feel like the Ilya moments are one reaching to him. And so the audience is in on it, right? Because it's my reaction to no something that is funny. But then there's moments where Ilya is just being a little bitch and I love Shane's round, and you're in a sort, dimmed down version. And then that's hilarious because you're not in on it, you know.

JT: It's just a different type of funny. He's just not a showman. He's not a joke man. He's a real kind of classic hockey player is that way. And Ilya kind of has a bit more of a "I don't give a fuck" attitude.



Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie play Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, up-and-coming hockey rivals competing for the game's top spot. Credit: Courtesy of Crave

Connor, there's an image of you from a good project (Abby, 2023) that's been shared side by side with your *Heated Rivalry* pics as an example of "Twink Death." I'm wondering for both of you, as your bodies change and you come into these more muscular roles, is it affecting how you act? Is it affecting your career?

CS: I think so, yeah. I go through a ton of phases. That was my all-vegan phase: I was vegan for three years. And then directly after that, I went into my bodybuilder phase that coincided with the *Heated Rivalry*. I’m always changing. I had a million other phases before this one too. I think that’s kind of what acting is, and I think that it bleeds into my real life a little bit. It’s just playing with your presence and what you look like.

JT: We also talked about it. I was like, "Hockey players eat pasta every day. They should not look cut or veiny. They’re big, they’re beefy, but we don’t want them to look like they go to a gym for aesthetics." These are athletes that use hockey as a sport, and for a long show. I wanted everybody eating, feeding their energy, their bodies, and that stuff. So yeah, we tried to do everything in a healthy way that is as cool as it could be hockey as well, which is not swimming and it’s not running. Like, it’s a very different sport to that arena.

“Sex is a language in this show to tell a story”

Speaking of bodies, you worked closely with intimacy coordinator Chula Hunter. There's sometimes a misconception that intimacy coordinators are solely there to prevent people from stepping over the line or making others feel uncomfortable. But it's also an actually beneficial role and add to the sexiness. How does the presence of an intimacy coordinator impact your sex scenes?

HW: I've had sitting intimacy coordinators before, where sometimes it's too rehearsed or too restricted to the point where the actors are saying, "We can go further than this." Our show, even when we were filming the pilot, we were constantly having technical stuff (been, after that we talked about the who, what, where and when. Asking ourselves, "What does this mean in the story?" And then that almost needs to be reminded because you can be so in your head about the technical aspects. And I think Chula was a good reminder of, "Okay, you still need to sell this."

JT: These sex scenes were very scripted and very specific in the page. I knew as an actor that the last thing I want to be in my job is, "I’m not fun to either party. Also, sex is a language in this show to tell a story, so everything was very specific. Everything was choreographed much like a dance, so Chula was our choreographer in a way. Once you learn the steps, then you’re free to express yourself so you don’t have to be thinking: "What am I supposed to do next? Where does my hand go?"

Because again, there’s so much sex, and it has to change. They start off very young and they end up being people who've been having sex for years, who know each other’s bodies. But at first it’s all exploration and it’s all tentative. It’s all discovery, but it’s also fear. There’s so much going on.

In the vein of your earlier answer, Connor, about the personal bleeding into the professional, there's been an ongoing conversation about queer people playing queer roles. I'm curious how you guys navigated that, because it's a very business. On the other hand, this book and this story so, in part, about living authentically and openly. Do you feel there's a need to talk about your personal lives in relation to this project?

JT: I'd answer this for them. I don't think there's any reason to get into that stuff. I'll tell you something about the casting of both of them. I'm sure they don't remember this because it's a long time ago, right? It's actually against the law. So what you have to gauge is somebody's enthusiasm and willingness to do the work. And that's what's so impressive about both of these guys is they came into this being like, "Yeah, we're here to do this, and we are born to make this story feel authentic and to be as real as possible." And that's fucking hit it out of the pack.

In that casting process, does anything like come up for you when you reflect on those initial meetings and reading together?

HW: I remember Connor being very hard to get through, which only fed my performance because he was hard to reach and it was frustrating. He was going off script, taking very long pauses and some liberties. He ended out of his Zoom frame and I had to call him back into frame. And it was great. I remember I got a rise out of him. It was like half a smile and like a finger of an eyebrow.

CS: Yeah, something that sticks out to me, and something that people don't really talk about a lot is that different projects have different tones built into them. Like, if this is on a certain network or a certain channel, or a certain type of TV show, that's gonna have a certain vibe and a certain tone. It felt very obvious to me the moment that I read with Hudson that we were making the same TV show.

JT: They read together and we were all like, "Oh my god, this is fucking done. Flush the rest of it down the toilet." Their chemistry was just insane. It was always going to be about chemistry. We tested both of them separately and they seeing them together, it was just like perfection. We couldn’t ask for more.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Nash Hurtado (he/they)
Nash Hurtado is a queer writer and TV producer. After having graduated from the nation's most senior government and business bankers, he dove into entertainment and has helps TV shows tell captivating stories.
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