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'Heated Rivalry' is the gay hockey romance you didn't know you needed

Spoiler alert: It's not really about hockey

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By John Paul King

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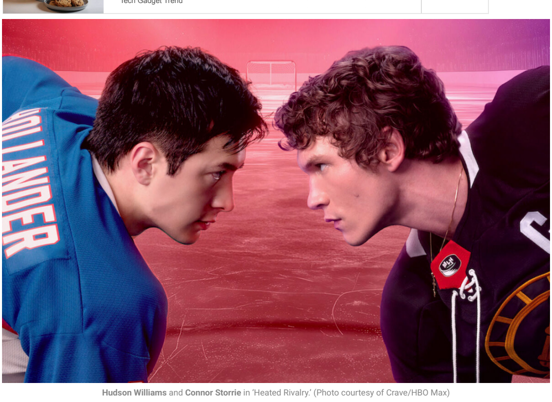

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in 'Heated Rivalry.' (Photo courtesy of Crave/HBO Max)

Spoiler Alert: "Heated Rivalry" is not about hockey.

The new limited series, produced for the Canadian streaming service Crave and available in the U.S. on HBO Max, may look from its marketing like a show about hockey. It definitely contains a lot of scenes involving hockey – being played, being watched, being talked about – and the story is surrounded by hockey; its two main characters are professional hockey players, and their competition as opposing hockey champions (the "rivalry" of the title) is a major factor that moves the plot.

Even so, if you're a hockey fan who knows nothing about it, and you stumble across it while looking for something to watch, be warned before you press "play" that you are probably in for a big surprise.

Adapted from "Game Changers," a popular book series by Canadian author Rachel Reid, the show follows the two above-mentioned hockey pros – Canadian Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Russian Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), each of whom is a star player for their respective team – as they compete against each other with puffed-up "alpha" swagger, on the ice and in the media. When the skates (and cameras) are off, however, there's a different story going on. Despite the jocular animosity of their public relationship, there's something else brewing between them in private, and it comes to a head when a commercial shoot leads to an unexpected rendezvous in a hotel room.

Well, unexpected for them, at least. We in the audience have seen it coming since that first smoldering glance across the rink.

From there, "Heated Rivalries" continues over a course of years as the two secret lovers use every match, tournament, or Winter Olympics where they compete against each other as an opportunity for more rendezvous in more hotel rooms. But while their meetings may be all about a release of pent-up passion, the bond between them is based on something more. In the high-stakes world of professional hockey, there's not much they can do about that – publicly, at least – without killing their careers; in Ilya's case, as a Russian citizen and the son of a prominent government official, the situation carries the potential for even graver consequences.

That's just at the end of the first two episodes, though. The show, which drops an episode weekly through December, leaves us hanging there to explore the story of another hockey player, Scott (François Arnaud), teammate and best friend to Shane, who becomes entangled with smoothie barista Kip (Robbie G.K.) in a whole secret gay life of his own.

If you're thinking that the idea of a gay love story between two butch hockey players is a preposterous premise for romance fiction, think again – or at least redefine your idea of "preposterous." It's a genre that has exploded in popularity among a surprisingly large demographic of romance literature fans who also love hockey, combining the thrill of forbidden love with the drama and excitement of their favorite sport to catapult numerous writers, including Reid, onto the bestseller lists, which was surely a factor in the choice to translate her "Games Changers" books to the screen, courtesy of the show's queer creator/writer/director Jacob Tierney.

The latter (also co-creator of "Letterkenny," another popular and queer-friendly Canadian show with a strong hockey presence) delivers it with all the glossy, high-charged passion one would expect – and more – from a romance about world-class athletes in love. Set within the rarified world of wealth and privilege that is professional sports, the drama takes place against a backdrop of packed arenas, awards ceremonies, elegant fundraisers, and luxury hotels, where the protagonists must play at being enemies while secretly planning their next hook-up with each other.

Which brings us to the thing that *really* makes "Heated Rivalry" the buzziest queer show of late 2025: the sex. The show takes full advantage of its story's obvious sex appeal – as well as its leading actors' sculpted, athletic bodies – to serve up some of the hottest onscreen trysts in gay TV memory. Though they stop just short of being "explicit," they're the kind of sex scenes that push the limits of "softcore" right to the edge and make sure we know exactly what's happening, even if we can't see the details. Tierney turns those steamy private meetings between Shane and Ilya into set pieces and centers entire episodes around them, because he knows they're what the audience is there for. Like we said, this is not really a show about hockey.

That said, it's not really *just* a story about sex, either. In between those steamy scenes of athletic carnality, there's a lot of percolating emotion happening – and thanks to the exquisitely tuned performances of Williams and Storrie, whose electric chemistry doesn't just spark during their lovemaking scenes, but crackles through their every moment together on screen, it all comes across with elegant clarity. Shane and Ilya may want each other's bodies, but there's something more they want, too. There's a tenderness in the way they look at each other, even when they're smack-talking on the rink, and it infuses their scenes of passion, too, which arguably makes them even more blistering hot. More than that, it calls to us with its fond familiarity; it's that heady feeling to which most of us, if we're lucky, can relate, a sense of yearning, of needing another person so keenly that it feels like a physical sensation. In other words, it feels like being in love.

Of course there's another layer too, which hangs over everything and ultimately fuels all the conflict in the plot: the pervasive homophobia that exists in professional sports, creating an atmosphere in which players are pressured to present nothing but a masculine, definitively "straight" image and any hint of non-heterosexual leanings is enough to destroy a career. That's not a situation limited only to pro athletes, of course; many of us in the wider world also face the same dilemma, which is why we can all relate to this aspect of their love story, too.

Still, it would be misleading to say that "Heated Rivalry" is really about social commentary either, though it certainly brings those issues into the mix. With only half the six-episode season released so far, it's hard to draw a certain conclusion, but what stands out most about the series so far is the way it captures the palpable joy of being in love – and yes, that includes the joy of expressing that love physically. These joys come with pain, too, when they can only be shared in secret, and it's that obstacle that Shane and Ilya – and apparently, with the side trip of episode three, Scott and Kip as well – must find a way to overcome if they want their *real* yearning to be fulfilled.

For now, we'll have to wait to find out if they can all make it. In the meantime, you know we'll all be watching each new installment with our full attention, waiting to see what happens during Shane and Ilya's next match-up.

And no, we're not talking about hockey.

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'Open to It' Season 2 proves happy endings come in many forms

Frank Smith's queer comedy returns to OUTtv for another chaotic season

Published 1 month ago on November 6, 2025
By Noah Christiansen

Season 1 of *Open to It* made headlines for its unapologetic sex scenes – and for good reason. Everything from the awkward to the pleasurable, and the awkwardly pleasurable, was on full display.

Now, with Season 2 premiering November 6 on OUTtv, creator-star Frank Arthur Smith digs deeper into what intimacy means once the thrill wears off. "Thematically, I wanted to delineate the difference between sex and intimacy this season," Smith tells the Blade. "Not all sexual encounters are intimate, and not all intimate encounters are sexual."

And with that, Season 2 starts off differently: the premiere doesn't include a single sex scene.

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TELEVISION

Bear World TV at long last debuts: A new screen experience for the global bears far and wide

Bear World TV is crashing your screen with flair, fabulousness, and a whole lot of fur. From nightlife to news, our five fierce hosts are serving up bites of bear culture hotter than Palm Springs in August.

Published 4 months ago on August 11, 2025
By AJ Sloan

Bears, start your streaming engines. Bear World Magazine, the top-notch lifestyle bible for the global bear scene, is turning up the heat with the launch of Bear World TV, a bold new video platform serving up weekly mouthfuls of news, nightlife, culture, and cheeky charm. Dropping its debut episodes last week, Bear World TV will roll out its fur-forward content across the Bear World Magazine website, YouTube, and socials.

At the core of Bear World TV are five fabulous hosts – Marquis The Honey Bear, Joe Martone, Ravi Roth, Hunter Harden, and Los Angeles Blade's very own publisher, Alexander Rodriguez – serving up fast, fun, two-minute segments that highlight the sweet, sweaty, and saucy sides of bear life. It's a frothy mix of nightlife, travel, pop culture, community events, and some well-

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TELEVISION

ICYMI: 'Overcompensating' a surprisingly sweet queer treat

A sweet, savvy show about breaking free to embrace your true self

Published 5 months ago on July 10, 2025
By John Paul King

Holmes, Benito Skinner and Wally Baram in 'Overcompensating.' (Photo courtesy of MGM Amazon)

Pride month 2025 is now behind us, and while it's safe to say that this year's celebrations had a darker edge than usual, it's also true that they came with a particularly rich bounty of new queer movies and shows to entertain us – so many, in fact, that even if we are facing a lull until the fall for another harvest of fresh content, there are still plenty of titles – which, for whatever reason, were off your radar – for you to catch up on in the meantime.

One of the most notable of these – the bingeworthy series "Overcompensating" (now streaming on Amazon Prime) – will most definitely have been *on* the radar for the plentiful fans of creator and star Benito Skinner, the actor/comedian who rose to viral fame through his content on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok; for anyone else, it might have

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TELEVISION

'White Lotus,' 'Severance,' 'Andor' lead Dorian TV Awards noms

'Voters have a special affinity for stories of self-discovery'

Published 6 months ago on June 27, 2025
By John Paul King

'White Lotus' received multiple nominations for the 16th annual Dorian TV Awards. (Photo courtesy of HBO Max)

As the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences wrapped up the voting for nominations in its annual race for the Emmy Awards this week, much of Hollywood (and countless fans with favorite contenders of their own) was buzzing with speculation about who and what will be included when the final slate of nominees is announced on July 15 – but just in time for Pride Month, GALECA (The Society of LGBTQ Entertainment Critics) has stolen a bit of its thunder.

The second largest entertainment journalists group in the world, GALECA is made up of 560 members who, as the group's press release proudly states, "write and work for some of the most respected and buzz-worthy media outlets in the U.S. and beyond." Last week, the organization announced its list of nominees for the 16th Annual Dorian TV Awards

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No, 'Mid-Century Modern' is not a 'Golden Girls' remake

And that's a good thing

Published 9 months ago on March 27, 2025
By John Paul King

The cast of 'Mid-Century Modern.' (Photo courtesy of Hulu)

There's long been a desire for a gay version of "The Golden Girls."

GenX (and younger) fans who have loved that show's iconic quartet of aging female "frenemies" have been clamoring for it since the actual "Golden Girls" was still on the air – so by the time the creators of "Mid-Century Modern" came up with the idea for a show about three gay friends "of a certain age" (and one cantankerous mother) living together in Palm Springs, it was hardly an original idea. Yet even if they weren't the first to fantasize about a show featuring the gay male equivalents of Dorothy, Blanche, Rose, and Sophia, it hardly matters. They were the ones that actually made it happen.

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Real Housewives, The Traitors, and Denise Richards Recaps…Oh my!

Your weekly reality TV tea from Drag Maven Norma Lee!

Published 9 months ago on March 11, 2025
By Norma Lee

'And still, I rise.' If you've been using this quote nonstop this week, you have also been obsessed with the instantly iconic third and final part of *The Real Housewives of Potomac* reunion. The final chapter in season 9 of RHOP really had it all.

No joke, I've watched it three times this week. In case you missed it, QVC queen Stacey Rusch got dragged by the women, the production and the man she allegedly paid to play her boyfriend on TV. This man not only said Rusch hired him to be her boyfriend on TV, but she also still owes him money for it. Rusch did not believe it until production brought out the raw footage and even then she kept it calm, cool and collected. Either way, she earned her spot in a second season. Meanwhile, between that bombshell and the 'oh-so-staged' Karen Huger video

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

'Drag House Rules' premieres on OUTtv. Here's the tea!

Parody meets drag in this playful takedown of the drag competition world

Published 10 months ago on February 26, 2025
By Alexander Rodriguez

Drag House Rules Cast / Credit P.E.G.

OUTtv's latest content for the queer community *Drag House Rules*, hit the screen on Friday,

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Truth be told, we got a sneak peek but had to keep our lips sealed until its release. For those who think the *Drag Race* franchise has gotten a bit full of itself and the fandom a bit too serious, you will love this take on the drag competition world.

Drop Dead Gorgeous meets *Drag Race's Untucked* as seven drag queens live under one roof to compete in a series of challenges to see who will win a cash prize of $100K. Scratch that, a prize VALUED at $100K. As one queen puts it, it could be $100K worth of paperclips for all they know. Where most competition shows place their competitors in expanse mansions. These queens have to live in a less-than-functional reality TV house with random smells

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Uncovering the remarkable trans representation in Netflix's 'The Secret of the River'

Trinidad González stars as a transgender model, alongside La Bruja De Texcoco, a muxe elder

Published 1 year ago on November 25, 2024
By **Gisselle Palomera**

(Screen capture via Netflix/YouTube)

"El Secreto Del Río," or "The Secret of the River," has made history as Trinidad González became the first transgender actress to star in a series by Netflix.

The eight-episode series handles trans and gender nonconforming representation in the most beautiful and impactful way I've seen to date on any show or film–especially in a Spanish series, considering the gender identity and sexuality taboos that exist in Mexican culture.

In a time in history where trans, gender nonconforming and intersex people are under attack and continue to face oppression when they demand basic human rights, this show beautifully and tactfully represents the true trials and tribulations that trans and gender nonconforming

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Putting off watching 'Monsters?' You're missing out

Netflix hit about Menendez killings is awards-worthy TV

Published 1 year ago on October 19, 2024
By **John Paul King**

Cooper Koch and **Nicholas Alexander Chavez** star in 'Monsters.' (Photo courtesy of Netflix)

You know it's there. It's been lurking in your Netflix queue for weeks now, taunting you, beckoning you with its sure promise of sexy, lurid thrills, but you've been holding back – and we can't say we blame you. After all, that "Dahmer" show was pretty hard to watch.

For many Netflix viewers, there have been no such qualms; though Ryan Murphy's "Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story" debuted nearly a month ago, it's currently the platform's #3 most-watched series in the U.S., despite mixed reviews from critics and controversy over the way the show's narrative depicts the facts of the notorious 1989 murder that put the two brothers in the national spotlight through two highly publicized trials. Even if killing their wealthy parents put the Menendez brothers into prison for life, it also put them into the upper

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PBS 'Disco' is a Pride party you don't want to miss

Rich collection of footage highlighting the music and fashion of the time

Published 1 year ago on June 23, 2024
By **John Paul King**

Studio 54 in 1977. (Photo by Bill Bernstein; courtesy BBC Studios)

Anyone who was alive and old enough to listen to the radio in the 1970s knows that disco wasn't just a genre of music. It was an entire lifestyle, centered around dancing in nightclubs to music that meshed R&B with new electronic sounds and an infectiously up-tempo beat – and at the height of its popularity, it had bled into the entire American culture. Every TV theme or movie soundtrack was flavored with a disco vibe, every musician seeking a comeback recorded a disco record, and every would-be dance dandy dreamed of sporting a pair of "angel flight" slacks to the disco every Saturday night.

If you didn't live through it yourself, most of what you might know about this era is likely gleaned from its popular culture – the hot radio singles, the popular movies like "Saturday

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