

★★★★ Culture TV & radio Review

I don't like ice hockey or romance, but this very steamy gay sports drama is great fun



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Heated Rivalry ★★★★★

Romance fiction has surged in popularity recently, thanks in part to dedicated BookTok and Instagram communities, and several subgenres have emerged – gone is the tame bodice ripping of your grandma's Mills & Boon novels. Now it's romantasy, paranormal romance, dystopian love and, perhaps the fastest-growing of them all, sports romance. And then there's a sub-subgenre: queer sports romance.

To get even more specific, one sport above others has been the setting: the uber-macho world of ice hockey.



Connor Storrie as Ilya and Hudson Williams as Shane, professional rivals and secret lovers. HBO MAX

No, I don't know why, either. But fans – interestingly, mostly young women – were outraged when *Heated Rivalry* was initially set for release only on Canadian streaming service Crave. Following much online chatter among fans about how they could watch the series – piracy, setting up VPNs – HBO Max picked it up at the 11th hour.

The first TV adaptation in the subgenre, *Heated Rivalry* is based on the steamy book of the same name by bestselling author Rachel Reid, from her Game Changers YA series. Although this series is decidedly more A(dult) than it is Y(oung).

Set in Canada, in Major League ice hockey (a fictionalised version of the National Hockey League), *Heated Rivalry* is the story of a secret years-long love affair between two closeted gay players – the wholesome Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), who plays for the Montreal Metros, and Russian player Ilya Rozanov (Texan actor Connor Storrie, doing a reasonable accent), who has been drafted to the Boston Raiders – who are the “two most talked-about prospects in the world”.

The pair meet before they make it to the big league, in 2008, and we follow their careers as they work their way up, becoming rivals on the ice – badmouthing each other before matches, WWF-style – and then secret lovers off.

The series is set across eight years of their clandestine affair, but it's only 13 minutes into episode one before they're alone in the locker room showers and furtive glances lead to the first of several very graphic sex scenes.

EDITOR'S PICK



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Across years, hockey seasons, and even countries – they're in Russia for the 2014 Sochi Olympics at one point – Ilya and Shane studiously avoid each other in public while sexting in private, using false names lest anybody stumble upon their text messages (although those dick pics are something of a giveaway).



Strap in for some seriously graphic sex scenes ...

Enemies-to-lovers is a classic romance trope, and rival sportsmen-to-lovers makes perfect sense. I profess no interest in hockey – granted, there isn't a lot of on-ice action – or classic romance narratives, but *Heated Rivalry* is great fun.

There's genuine chemistry between the leads (given the sex scenes, they'd need to be comfortable with each other), and while there's no taxing plot, both characters feel fully realised, and the pushing-the-MR-rating sex scenes are balanced by their sweet true love for each other. Adapted from the hugely popular YA book series, *Heated Rivalry* balances in-your-face sex scenes with a tale of sweet romance. The uptight Shane, who is Asian-Canadian, is reluctant to admit his sexuality, and has the hockey equivalent of a “stage mom” who is also his manager, while the overtly flirtatious Ilya faces pressure from his family in Russia (where queer people are [still not accepted](#)), including a dirtbag brother who demands money from him and a particularly strict father, who is a stern Russian official.

Only two episodes were available for preview but if the storyline sticks to Reid's book, the trajectory for the secret lovers is positive. Perhaps the “bury your gays” tragic ending traditionally given to queer characters has finally been *actually* buried.

***Heated Rivalry* is now streaming on HBO Max.**

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