

'Heated Rivalry' star François Arnaud on navigating fame, fans and online firestorms

Alex Nino Gheciu | The Canadian Press | Jan 18, 2026 | Updated 8 hrs ago



François Arnaud is shown in a scene from the show "Heated Rivalry" in this handout photo. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Handout - Bell Media (Mandatory Credit) (3)



By the time François Arnaud realized how obsessed people were with "Heated Rivalry," it was already too late.

"I remember telling my agent, 'I think this is going to be a worldwide sensation.' But I did not think that it would happen overnight like it did," the Montreal-born actor said in an interview Friday.

"It's a thing to deal with, to be witnessed at all times. I can't go out on the street at all without being recognized in 20 seconds."



"Heated Rivalry" — Crave's breakout gay hockey drama starring Arnaud as veteran forward Scott Hunter — has exploded into a global phenomenon. Carried by HBO Max stateside, the show has dominated the American media cycle, its cast appearing on late-night talk shows and red-carpet events.

The series has also sparked fervent online discussion, intense fan scrutiny and a level of visibility that has fundamentally altered Arnaud's daily life.

"It's been incredible, but also a bit scary ... I've always valued normalcy, and so there's an adjustment period there."

This week, Arnaud got chased all over New York by paparazzi during a press tour, prompting him to reconsider his living arrangements in Los Angeles.

"I'm like, 'Oh, maybe a little bungalow with street access, not on a gated property, is not the best thing,'" he laughed. "So yeah, I'm moving into a building with a doorman."

The attention has also intensified online. After being photographed at JFK airport with "Heated Rivalry" co-star Connor Storrie on Wednesday, a social media firestorm erupted, with some fans directing hostility at Arnaud for seemingly disrupting the fantasy that Storrie's real life should mirror his on-screen romance with Hudson Williams.

"In general, fans have been incredibly positive and respectful. For the ones that aren't, I think it's a lot of younger fans who don't really understand the difference between reality and fiction," said Arnaud.

"I honestly wish they would just rewatch the show, because it doesn't seem like they got its message. Pay attention more closely. Did we watch the same show?"

In the series, Storrie's Ilya Rozanov and Williams' Shane Hollander are hockey stars who hide their same-sex relationship out of fear of backlash — a tension mirrored in Hunter's own storyline, which sees him navigating a quiet romance with a barista played by Robbie G.K.

Arnaud also made headlines Thursday after unfollowing his "Heated Rivalry" co-stars and creator Jacob Tierney on Instagram. On Friday, he posted a grid featuring three images of Williams giving the middle finger, alongside a fourth of Arnaud doing the same — a gesture many fans interpreted as a response to the firestorm.

Arnaud insists people are reading too deeply into it.

"It's completely unrelated to that," he said of the Instagram post.

"I mean, 'completely' maybe would be a lie, but mostly unrelated to that. I've done these 'spot the differences' posts for a long time, and I just thought it was nice to do something with Hudson, and that's it."

Arnaud said the unfollows were part of a broader social media pullback.

"What's happening is that I'm unfollowing everyone, and Instagram won't let me do that all at once. You can only unfollow a certain amount of people over 24 hours, which I did not know at the time," he said.



He's since refollowed the "Heated Rivalry" team, though he says they'll ultimately be unfollowed again.

"I will unfollow everyone except Amnesty International," he vowed.

He said the show's intense fan scrutiny has encouraged him to spend less time online. He's blocked X on his phone and has stopped reading comments.

"It's nice. It's giving me an excuse to just log off and not pay attention to that," he said.

"I'm reading a lot of great scripts and meeting tons of great people and I want to read books and go for walks in the woods."

He's looking for roles that are a departure from the wholesome Scott Hunter.

"Not because I didn't love playing Scott Hunter. I'll probably play him again, and I want to," said Arnaud, who broke out in Xavier Dolan's 2009 Oedipal drama "J'ai tué ma mère."

"But I'm always trying to reinvent myself and surprise myself — look in unexpected places to see if I'm there."

For all its chaos, "Heated Rivalry" has brought something rare: a genuinely expansive audience. Arnaud said he's heard from viewers ranging from straight men to grandmothers, drawn to the show's warmth and emotional honesty.

"For some reason, lesbians love it," he laughed.

"There's something really joyous about the show's message, something hopeful. We're so over-informed now. It's really hard to just look at the news at all. There are characters with struggles on the show, but ultimately, you feel that pull toward happiness."

Arnaud joked the "Heated Rivalry" press run has been so relentless the cast is running out of things to say about the show. Luckily, he's got other projects to talk about.

He stars as an unhinged DJ in a dramedy directed by Annapurna Sriram and he'll appear in Hernán Jiménez's portrait of motherhood "Abril," which premieres next month at the Santa Barbara Film Festival. It marks the first time he's worked in Spanish.

"It's the freest I've ever felt working in another language," he said.

Between whirlwind press tours, online trolls and quiet woodland walks, Arnaud's message to the fans remains simple.

"Love is love is love. I love everyone," he said with a chuckle.

"Everyone deserves sunshine."

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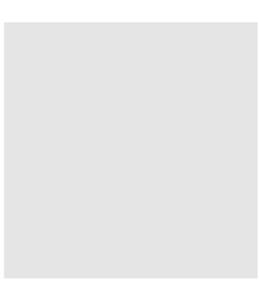
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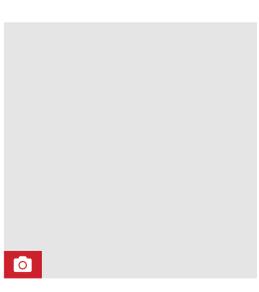


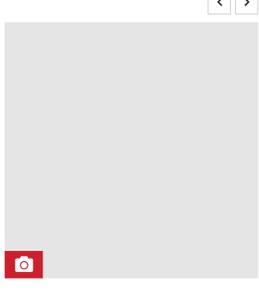
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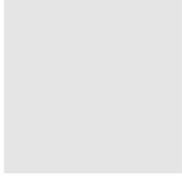


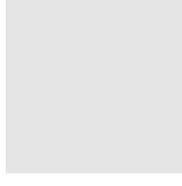
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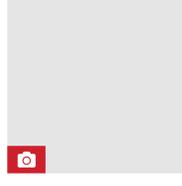
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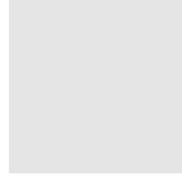
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