HBO's New 98% RT Sleeper Hit Is 1 of the Greatest Streaming Shows of the Decade

By Cassandra D'Agosta — Published 2 days ago
Cassandra D'Agosta is a Features Writer for CBR, where she covers movies and television with a creative, analytical lens. Beyond her work at CBR, Cassie writes fiction, with her debut novel, *Ellis Academy*, hitting shelves June 6, 2026. She served as an editor on the sci-fi noir comic *eJunky*…

× Remove Ads
81% OF EMPLOYERS WOULD HIRE ANOTHER WGU GRAD
*2024 HARRIS POLL
WGU
LEARN MORE
× Remove Ads
Crush
A Crush for every craving.
Crush- Powder Drink Mix - Sugar Free &…
Save 5% with Subscribe & Save
$11.35 $11.95 prime

TRENDING NOW
33 Years Later, the Greatest Quote in Western Movie History Is Still Untouchable
Fallout Gets Second Prime Video Show Following Season 2's 95% RT Success
Every Free Game On Epic for the Holiday Giveaway 2025

HBO's chart-topping sports drama, *Heated Rivalry*, has taken the world by storm. Based on the *Game Changers* book series by Rachel Reid, the show follows Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov as they go from rookie players to hockey all-stars. Frequently pitted against each other, the two were arch rivals professionally, but behind closed doors, they carried out a steamy romance.

Heated Rivalry depicts two LGBT romances within the world of professional hockey. The players live in a hypermasculine world and struggle with hiding their true selves, telling refreshingly and uncompromisingly beautiful queer love stories. The show is first and foremost a steamy sports-themed romance, but it also features complex family dynamics that add layers to the torrent of emotions the characters experience.

HBO's Heated Rivalry Is the Steamy Sports Drama that Became a Viral Sensation

Image via Warner Bros Discovery

× Remove Ads
WELLSHIRE DISCOVER FAMILY-FRIENDLY BACON · WHOLE FOODS MARKET · Shop now on Amazon >
Ad

Heated Rivalry was adapted and produced by Jacob Tierney, who wrote and directed all six episodes of the critically acclaimed series. The first episode begins in December 2008, when Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) meet outside a hockey rink. Shane compliments Ilya as a player, and the conversation is a little awkward, but both feel the chemistry between them.

"Rookies" moves through Shane and Ilya's rookie season quickly, highlighting moments when they crossed paths. The two were always keenly aware of the other's presence in a room. The competition and the tension were thick, underscoring every scene. For the first few minutes of the episode, Shane and Ilya barely spoke, and everything was communicated with gestures and looks. Racing on stationary bikes and sharing a bottle of water has never been so electrically charged.

× Remove Ads
Aveeno. New Year, New Routine © Kenvue Brands LLC 2026
Ad

Starting in the aughts, it's not difficult to recognize why they would be so concerned about coming out in such an aggressively masculine and, generally, intolerant field as sports. LGBT rights and tolerance have made significant progress since then, but they said the usual things that people said back then to stay in the closet: "I'm not gay, I'm just curious." While the sex scenes are plentiful and steamy AF, they were also raw, character-driven, and emotional. *Heated Rivalry* managed to avoid being gratuitously sexual because they don't feel as though they're there to sell sex, but rather vulnerability and intimacy.

In a story about otherness and forbidden love, the drama is inherent, but the show balances those heavier themes with a touch of cheeky humor. In one scene, after Shane and Ilya had one of their trysts, Shane's mother, Yuna, complained about Ilya, saying, "F*ck him. I'm sorry, but I mean it... F*ck him right up the butt." Shane can't help but crack a smile at that. Or when they exchange phone numbers, Ilya programs their names as Lily (Ilya) and Jane (Shane).

× Remove Ads
DOVE MEN + CARE Body and Face Bar To Clean and... Save $0.98 with coupon prime
Ad

After the first two episodes, it's clear that Shane and Ilya are becoming more than just a casual hookup. Ilya pushes Shane outside his comfort zone, and their deepening connection scares them both. After two emotionally turbulent and red-hot episodes about Ilya and Shane's star-crossed romance, *Heated Rivalry* presses pause on that story to go back a few months in time and show viewers another and completely different queer love story.

Heated Rivalry Delivers More than One Unapologetic and Groundbreaking Queer Love Story

Image via Warner Bros Discovery

In the third episode, "Hunter," *Heated Rivalry* follows Scott Hunter (François Arnaud), an American hockey player who was older and closeted. When completing his morning run, he walks into a juice bar and meets Kip (Robbie G.K.). The attraction is immediate, and Scott subtly flirts with Kip as he orders a blueberry smoothie with extra banana. As he's leaving, another customer recognizes Scott as a professional hockey player.

Ad

Kip becomes a hockey fan overnight. When Scott comes in again the next day, he tells Kip that he's a little superstitious and will be back on other game days. Kip is hesitant to believe that Scott is gay or interested in him at first, but his co-worker picks up on the vibes, and he makes sure that he's working when Scott has a home game. On the third visit, Scott invites Kip to a game. They run into each other at another event, when Kip is working as a waiter.

Scott asks Kip if he wants to grab some better food after the event. They quickly decide to go to Scott's place and order in. Scott was more open and honest than Shane and Ilya in their romance. He asks Kip to stay the night, and the next morning, he asks him to basically move in with him. Scott is upfront about the fact that he's in the closet and that he tried to wait until after retirement for romance, but then Kip came along, and Scott wanted him more than he could bear.

Ad

For a couple of months, things are great, but hiding and lying start to wear on Kip, who is openly gay. He understands Scott's choices and loves him, but eventually, that's not enough. They break up after Kip's friend tells Scott how miserable Kip is. She says that they both deserve sunshine. It changed the tone, and they both knew if Scott couldn't step up for Kip, they were over. Scott wasn't ready, and they ended things, but neither moved on.

For the next few episodes and years, Scott and Kip went their separate ways. When Scott won the World Cup in 2017, largely because both Shane and Ilya were injured, he achieved his lifelong dream. Friends and family of the winning team came on the ice to celebrate with the team, and that's when Scott saw Kip in the stands. He beckoned him over, bringing him onto the ice and, very publicly, coming out by kissing the love of his life.

Ad

It was a heartwarming moment that Shane and Ilya watched with bated breath. When Shane was injured and doped up on pain meds in the hospital, Ilya visited him to see how he was. Shane asked Ilya to stay with him for the summer at his cottage. It was private, and they could really relax and be together. After watching Scott's momentous kiss, Ilya and Shane were inspired to give what was happening between them a chance.

Ilya called Shane and told him he was coming to the cottage. The final episode is a beautiful collection of romantic and honest moments between them. They both officially dropped the "L" word, and Shane came up with a plan for them to be together in public until they could retire and be open. Everything was perfect until Shane's dad stopped by and saw them sharing a kiss.

The Sleeper Hit Sports Drama Is More Than Just a Romance

Image via Warner Bros Discovery

Ad

In addition to dealing with the challenges of being gay hockey players, Ilya and Shane also contend with complicated family lives. Shane's mother is very career-focused, helping Shane land multiple sponsorships and keeping him on a macrobiotic diet for peak performance. His father, David, played by *Superman & Lois*' Dylan Walsh, is a little more laid back.

When Shane arrives late to a meal, saying he lost track of time going down a YouTube rabbit hole, David asks what he was watching. Shane lies, saying he was watching videos of unlikely animal friends. When Yuna tells him he should be watching hockey videos, David says those animal friends deserve some more time, providing a clear contrast of their parenting techniques.

Despite the pressure and focus Yuna places on Shane, it's nothing compared to Ilya's toxic family dynamic. Ilya's father constantly disparaged Ilya. Nothing was good enough; every loss was a personal affront to him and all of Russia. Ilya's brother Alexei was a careless cokehead who treated his brother like a bank. As *Heated Rivalry* moves through time quickly, skipping months at a time, Ilya's father begins to show signs of dementia.

Ad

Subscribe to the newsletter for Heated Rivalry insights
Explore candid episode breakdowns, character analysis, and representation-focused commentary on Heated Rivalry — subscribe to the newsletter for focused coverage that unpacks why the show resonates.
Email Address | Subscribe
By subscribing, you agree to receive newsletter and marketing emails, and accept Valnet's Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. You can unsubscribe anytime.

As his father grows worse, Ilya pays Alexei to take care of their dad. In the fifth episode, Ilya returns unexpectedly to Russia when his father dies. Shane was worried, texting and calling to check on him. After a blowout with his brother, Ilya calls Shane. He tries to talk about everything, but speaking English was too much on top of everything he was feeling.

In a heartbreakingly beautiful scene, Shane tells Ilya to get everything off his chest in Russian. Shane doesn't speak Russian, so he doesn't know specifically what Ilya says, but he feels his pain. The first time Ilya tells Shane that he loves him is during that call. The next time they meet up, their experience is emotional and intimate. They were hopelessly in love, but not quite ready for something so serious.

Fast-forward to "Cottage," where David catches them kissing. Not sure of how to respond to what he'd seen, David left without saying anything. Shane freaks out, but Ilya comforts him and goes with him to talk to his parents. Ilya's family would never have accepted him; Alexei frequently used homophobic slurs when speaking to his brother, but after cutting off ties to his toxic brother, Ilya wasn't burdened by that anymore.

Ad

David and Yuna were surprised, more by the Ilya part than the gay part of the story, creating a humorously awkward family dinner. Yuna has to step outside for a moment to cry—not because Shane is gay, but because she made him feel like he couldn't tell her that. Then she starts planning his coming out. How to approach sponsors and prepare a statement. The show ends on a delightfully happy note with Yuna and David planning to come for dinner with Ilya and Shane.

Heated Rivalry delivers incredible queer representation that Jacob Tierney fought for. Actor François Arnaud revealed that Tierney was all set up at a major US streamer to create the viral hockey show, but they had so many notes, like no kissing until episode five! Tierney refused to compromise his vision for the show, and thank goodness for that. He went to the Canadian streamer, Crave, instead. They had a smaller budget, but they made the show they wanted to make, and it's taken the world by storm as one of the greatest shows of the decade. It's no wonder they're already confirmed for a second season.

Ad

TV-MA · Drama · Romance · Sports

Release Date	November 28, 2025
Network	Crave
Directors	Jacob Tierney

Heated Rivalry

WHERE TO WATCH +

Powered by · Expand

TV · Heated Rivalry · HBO Max

Follow · Like · Share

THREAD 2 — Sign In To Your CBR Account
We want to hear from you! Share your opinions in the thread below and remember to keep it respectful.
Reply / Post
Sort by: Popular

NightwingOracle
2026-01-16 12:57:32
Love this show. The storyline, the acting, the music....it's extremely well done.
2 · Copy

paul
2026-01-16 21:06:07
This show is astonishingly good. All on a small budget too. Best show I have seen in years. Kudos to all involved.
1 · Copy

StevGren
2026-01-17 15:59:27
LOVE IT. The 2 minutes in episode 5, when hunter comes out in the arena ,and shane and ilya see it is my favorite piece of film work.I've ever seen
Copy

Terms | Privacy | Feedback

RECOMMENDED
Jan 10, 2026 — HBO's 4-Season Sci-Fi Slow Burn Was the Last Great Anti-Binge Series of Its Kind
6 days ago — Landman Season 2 Officially Confirms Billy Bob Thornton Will Be Replaced
9 hours ago — 9 Years Later, Netflix's Most Brutal Western Series Is an Underrated Masterpiece
31 minutes ago — 14 Years Later, Disney's Biggest Sci-Fi Gamble Is Officially a Cult Classic

SHORTS
By Grae Drake, Jan 9, 2026, 0:35 — Do the Creators of Ghosts US Stay in Touch with Their Counterparts?
By Grae Drake, Jan 9, 2026, 0:30 — Akiva Shaffer & Erica Huggins Tease Hope for Naked Gun Sequel
By Grae Drake, Jan 9, 2026, 0:30 — Joe Wright Explores How History Repeats in Mussolini: Son of the...
By Grae Drake, Jan 9, 2026, 0:35 — Babou Ceesay Teases What's Coming Next Season on Alien: Earth
By Grae Drake, Jan 9, 2026, 0:23 — What Elio's Directors and Producer Do When They're Not Making Movies

MORE FROM OUR BRANDS
MOVIEWEB — 37 Shows on Netflix That Couples Can Binge-Watch Together
GAMERANT — Every New Romance Anime Announced For 2025 (So Far)
GAMERANT — The Greatest Romance Anime Of All Time, Ranked (April 2025)
MOVIEWEB — The 25 Best Shows on Crave to Watch Right Now
COLLIDER — The 18 Highest-Rated TV Episodes on IMDb
SCREENRANT — Why There's No Heated Rivalry Tonight (January 2), & When New Episode Will...
COLLIDER — The 25 Best 'How I Met Your Mother' Episodes, Ranked According to IMDb

Neutrogena BEAUTY TO A SCIENCE — New Year, New You © Kenvue Brands LLC 2026
Advertisement: 0:04