‘Heated Rivalry’ update: I’m still at the cottage

Unpacking the rivalry, romance, and everything in between in Crave’s new original series

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The first episode aired on Nov. 28. IMAGE BY: ARDEN MASON-OURIQUE

Thirty-seven days and a dream made history in Canadian and international television.

Heated Rivalry, based on the second book in Canadian author Rachel Reid’s ***Game Changers*** series, tells the forbidden love story of Russian hockey player Ilya Rozanav, played by Connor Storrie, and Canadian hockey player Shane Hollander, played by Hudson Williams. What starts as an intense rivalry between the two athletes slowly turns into a secret, complicated, romantic relationship, with Jacob Tierney’s direction, gripping from start to finish.

Despite its later premiere in the year on Nov. 28 on Crave, a Canadian streaming platform, the show reportedly became the most-watched original series in Bell Media’s Crave history within the first seven days, and secured itself a second season quickly after, announced on Dec. 12.

Without decades of hype or towering expectations, *Heated Rivalry* unexpectedly became dear to my heart and completely overtook my social media feed. With excitement growing with each episode, my newfound love for the show is multilayered, and in a way that no show has ever left me before.

For context, I’m an obsessive show watcher, and no, I don’t just stick to Netflix. If you want proof, ask anyone in the *Journal* office. I’ve watched a variety of Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, Armenian, Dutch, American, and Canadian shows. Because of that, I’d like to think that I’ve developed a pretty good sense of what it takes to make the perfect show and book adaptation no matter where it’s produced in the world—and *Heated Rivalry* is exactly that.

From the casting of unknown actors rather than A-list celebrities, to the cinematography, dialogue, acting and writing, it’s clear that Tierney and the whole cast poured real love into Reid’s books. Watching that care unfold week after week was genuinely refreshing, and exactly the kind of treatment Ried’s book deserved.

The attention to detail is impossible to miss if you’re paying close enough attention. Every frame, every look, every touch, every moment on screen is intentional. This is especially clear when comparing the early episodes to the season finale, "The Cottage." At the start, Rozonav and Hollander’s relationship exists in the shadows, where everything had to be hidden and done in secret. By the time we got to the cottage (aka season finale), those clouds lifted (literally), giving way to sunshine throughout the episode, mirroring how far they’ve come.

The same intentional storytelling extends beyond Rozanov and Hollander. In the third episode, "Hunter," the focus shifts to Kip Bradey, a smoothie barista, and Scott Hunter, captain of the fictional hockey team New York Admirals and the first openly queer hockey player, following the first book of Ried’s *Game Changers* series. Their love story and challenges unfold on their own terms, giving the episode its own emotional weight.

Placed where it is in the season, the episode could’ve felt like a detour, but instead, Tierney leans into it and makes Bradey’s and Hunter’s story become the foundation that leads Rozanov and Hollander to the cottage in the season finale.

This is a show that demands attention. In an era where shows and movies are made for casual viewing, simplified so audiences can scroll on a second screen, *Heated Rivalry* demands more. It asks you to listen beyond the dialogue, to hear what’s being said between the lines. That includes conversations about Hollander’s Asian heritage and the responsibility he carries, or the complexity of Rozanov’s mental health struggles with his family and his identity while living in Russia.

What’s interesting is that, at least for me, the show represents something that often feels missing in real life: the absence of power imbalance. It offers a relationship where both people are on equal footing, where neither is diminished, so the other can thrive.

In an interview on the ***Spare Parts Podcast***, Tierney is blunt about society’s lack of engagement with women’s interests, especially when it comes to sexual needs. Women read, write, and talk about it [different sexual fantasies], yet culturally, we still don’t take what women want seriously.

And to further complicate things, Rozonav and Hollander’s relationship presents a version of masculinity that’s radically different from what’s often seen in heterosexual dynamics, where masculinity can lean toward aggression or control and quietly demands that women adjust themselves in ways that don’t align with who they are.

Yes, you might have come for the steam. Yes, it’s sexy and hot—but that’s just the cherry on the top. The impeccable storytelling and the slow love burn are what make it worth leaving your phone behind and spending a few hours in the cottage.

Tags

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