

# 'Heated Rivalry' star François Arnaud calls on NHL to improve LGBTQ+ inclusion



"If you're going to use our name, then back it up with real-life s—," actor François Arnaud said of the league capitalizing on the hit show's popularity. Gary Gershoff / Getty Images

By Julian McKenzie  
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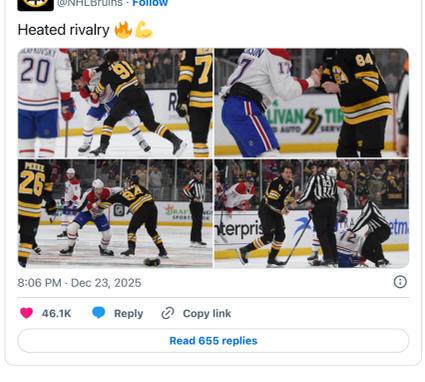
"Heated Rivalry" actor François Arnaud called on the NHL to improve its relationship with the LGBTQ+ community in a [recent interview with Andy Cohen of SiriusXM Radio on Thursday morning](#).

"The NHL, historically, has not been the most open organization to that kind of difference in their roster," Arnaud said, before citing [the NHL's ban on Pride Tape in October 2023](#). The league eventually [reversed the tape ban](#), but still has [a ban on Pride jerseys and other specialty jerseys in warmups and games](#).

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"Their sales are going up, apparently," Arnaud added. "The Boston Bruins tagged us on different clips online and it's getting incredible traction. I'm just hoping that it's backed up by actual openness to diversity."

"If you're going to use our name, then back it up with real-life s—."

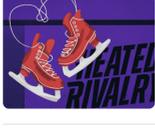


"Heated Rivalry" is a Canadian show available on Crave and HBO Max, centered around a fictional romance between two closeted professional hockey stars, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, on rival Montreal- and Boston-based teams. Arnaud plays veteran hockey player Scott Hunter, who develops his own relationship with a local male barista. The show has already been renewed for a second season and is Crave's most [successful](#) original series of all time.

Arnaud also clarified [previous comments he made while speaking to Variety at the Critics' Choice Awards earlier this month](#), in which he referred to the NHL as "failing."

"I think they're actually really good at capitalizing (on the success of the show)," Arnaud said. "It was a joke. I winked, actually. It was quoted in different, various media. But I winked at the camera when I said the 'failing NHL.' The NHL's not failing. It's a multi-billion-dollar organization."

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"Heated Rivalry is a phenomenon that is bringing new fans to our great sport and what those new fans will find is a warm welcome," the NHL said in a statement Friday.

Later on Thursday, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman told the media in Washington, D.C. that he binged the entire six-episode series in "one night," and also pointed to various initiatives, including Pride Nights at NHL games and their work with LGBTQ+ organization, [You Can Play](#).

"I think it's a wonderful story," Bettman said. "The content, particularly for young people, might be a little spicy. And so you have to balance that out in terms of how you embrace (the show)."

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"There are a lot of things about the game that we think are driving more and more people to the game," he said, "and I do believe 'Heated Rivalry' is one of those things."

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The 73-year-old called the hit TV show a "wonderful" and "compelling" story but said the content "might be a little spicy" for young people.

A week ago, Arnaud's co-star, Hudson Williams, appeared on Cohen's show and revealed the TV show inspired closeted pro athletes, including hockey players, to confide in author Rachel Reid. Reid is the author of the "Game Changers" book series, on which 'Heated Rivalry' is based.

"Sometimes they're just reaching out privately through Instagram," Williams said. "Those ones are the ones that really just kind of hit you and go, 'Oh, this is a fun show. It's celebratory. But also, sometimes, it's just hitting people right in the nerve.'"

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#### 'Heated Rivalry' star says closeted pro athletes have reached out because of TV show

Actor Hudson Williams said on Sirius XM Radio that he has received messages from "hockey players, football players, basketball players."

There have never been any openly gay players in the NHL. Luke Prokop, a defenseman currently playing for the American Hockey League's Bakersfield Condors, came out as gay in July 2021 while under contract with the NHL's Nashville Predators.

By Julian McKenzie  
Staff Writer, Senators

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Julian McKenzie is an NHL staff writer and contributor to The Athletic's news and enterprise team for The Athletic. McKenzie also hosts The Chris Johnston Show with The Athletic's Chris Johnston. McKenzie is also the writer of the upcoming book, Black Aces, on Black hockey players and people. McKenzie's work can also be found in The New York Times, FiveThirtyEight, the Montreal Gazette, the Canadian Press, TSN 690, CTV Montreal and more. Follow Julian on Twitter [@jkamckenzie](#)