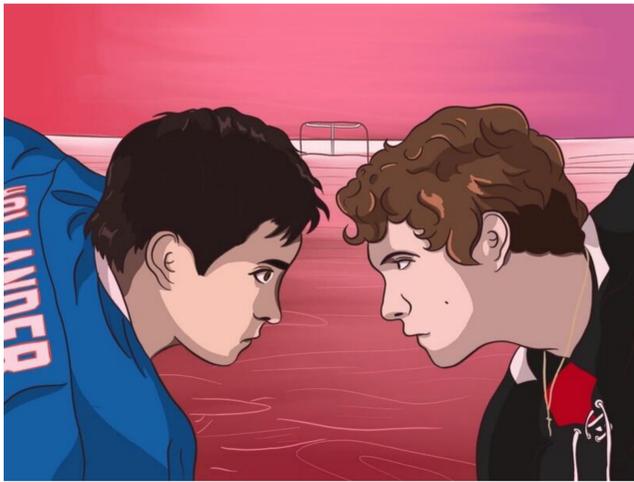




SCREENTIME COLUMN

'Heated Rivalry' hits with fans, sheds light on underrepresented community



Based on Rachel Reid's novel, HBO Max's 'Heated Rivalry' follows a romance between two gay hockey players, as they explore their sexuality. The six-episode show was renewed for a season two. MARIA MASEK | CONTRIBUTING ILLUSTRATOR

By Arabella Klonowski ASST. NEWS EDITOR 16 HOURS AGO

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While news circulates of rising stars Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie rumored to be seated among Charlize XCX and Paul Mescal at the Golden Globes and receiving photo spreads in nearly every magazine, more and more people are introduced to HBO Max's 'Heated Rivalry.'

Directed by Jacob Tierney, the six-episode show follows the romantic relationship between famous ice hockey 'rivals' (as the name suggests). The show was adapted from Rachel Reid's novel of the same name, part of the 'Game Changers' book series.

Though the show is widely known for its frequent graphic sex scenes, it details a sweet and tender romance between two men. Despite a lack of gay representation in sports, the two allow themselves to explore their sexuality and create their own narrative.

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After an initially awkward meeting, the protagonists begin a public 'rivalry,' as the hockey world waits to see who will elicit the number one pick in the Major League Hockey draft. Soon after Russia's rookie Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) earns the pick, he falls into a roughly seven-year secret situationship and budding romance with Canada's golden boy, Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams).

As someone who has seen the show two times in its entirety since its post-Thanksgiving day release, the series has now consumed every social media app on my phone, from countless TikTok edits to articles debriefing the intricacies of the actors and characters.

The hidden romance between Ilya and Shane demonstrates the lack of gay representation in the world of men's sports. In women's sports, players and viewers have countless examples of gay athlete relationships, like those between Christen Press and Tobin Heath, Sue Bird and Megan Rapinoe and Paige Bueckers and Azzi Fudd. The same cannot be said for men's sports.

A series that the media often boils down to a steamy romance is making real change. Real representation comes from the media we consume, and the production of more shows like 'Heated Rivalry' will ensure more people feel comfortable with embracing their true selves.

Given that nearly 10% of Americans identify as LGBTQ+, it is likely that there are many relationships between professional male athletes even if they aren't public. 'Heated Rivalry' gives players, regardless of sexuality, a chance to see themselves represented. Ilya's struggles with Russia's anti-LGBTQ+ laws also sheds light on a relatively underdiscussed civil rights outcry.

Infographic showing 324M MIN. and 'Surging streams' with hockey equipment.

ADELAIDE GUAN | DESIGN EDITOR

Williams said closeted players have reached out to him, thankful for the representation. The show has been a catalyst for real athletes to come out to the public; club hockey player Jesse Kortuem publicly embraced his sexuality after watching the show.

To those who only saw the show as a compilation of sex scenes, like I did the first time, I really urge you to start again.

Convinced to rewatch 'Heated Rivalry' for a second time by my superfan roommate, I saw the moments Shane and Ilya each fall for the other and then suddenly begin to realize they're in way over their heads.

Their dynamic isn't a repetition of casual hookups, but instead a slow build up as they learn each other's intricacies and fall in love despite the odds.

My favorite scene takes place in episode five, 'I'll Believe in Anything,' the season's highest rated. After struggling with his father's death, and arguing with his homophobic brother, Ilya calls Shane. Even though Shane will not understand him, he tells him to speak to him in Russian so he can talk more freely.

Having the show's first 'I love you' in Russian and therefore hidden from Shane, made a supposed tender and vulnerable moment into a turning point for the pair's relationship. Speaking in another language allowed Ilya to verbalize how he felt before he could really say it to Shane.

Ilya's display of raw emotion, pain and fear of falling in love with Shane, especially for a character who is usually stoic, is the most beautiful and passionate moment of the entire season.

My least favorite episode is, unsurprisingly, the one that deviates from my favorite pair. Episode 3 follows another romance involving longtime player Scott Hunter, tucked away even from Shane and Ilya's eyes, demonstrating the struggles of a public non-heterosexual relationship in the hockey world. Still, I think it draws out the story unnecessarily and is placed awkwardly between episodes, taking time away from the star couple that we're all really here to see.

All in all, the show created an insanely detailed narrative, shining light on a community that needs it, despite a condensed filming time of just under two months and relatively small budget.

It brought us adoring fans two actors who can't seem to stay away from TikTok edits and late night interviews and showed us the most perfectly perfected Texas turned Russian accent from Storrie.

Recently renewed for a second season, 'Heated Rivalry' gives viewers a beautifully done and well-crafted evergreen romance audiences are always hungry for, with the LGBTQ+ representation men's sports needed yesterday.

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