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## BEYOND THE ICE: HOW "HEATED RIVALRY" IS REDEFINING MASCULINITY IN HOCKEY

January 21, 2026 by Natalie Zurakowski



Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie in "Heated Rivalry." Credit: Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max via TNS

Captivating. Beautiful. Enamoring. These are the three words Elizabeth Pilon, a first-year in nursing, used to describe the global phenomenon of "Heated Rivalry."

Inspired by the queer hockey romance novels by Rachel Reid, "Game Changer" and "Heated Rivalry," the Crave original television series from Canada has become a worldwide sensation since its debut in late November.

The series follows the complicated relationship between hockey superstars — and rivals — Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov as they face challenges with sexuality, acceptance and culture.



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Since its release on HBO Max, the series has quickly become one of the streaming platform's most popular shows. According to a Jan. 10 [New York Times article](#), it has exceeded 600 million minutes streamed in the U.S. alone since early January.

The show's unexpected success has broken barriers in the sports community and changed the narrative of how masculinity and sexuality are seen in athletics, with the show inspiring NHL player Jesse Korteum to publicly come out as gay following the show's rise in popularity.

Abby Corcoran, a third-year graduate student in the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, said she believes part of the series' success comes from its opposition to toxic masculinity.

"The thing that makes these sports legible is their vision of masculinity that requires or is in contrast to any sort of queerness," Corcoran said. "'Heated Rivalry' is showing versions of an alternative masculinity that is soft and vulnerable. Seeing redeemable masculinities on screen gives people permission to love the way that men love. Particularly as we're coming off of this conversation about how masculinity is toxic and damaging, this gives an alternative vision for women and men who are attracted to men [as] something to hope for or aspire toward."

For fans like Pilon, she said the appeal of "Heated Rivalry" goes beyond the sport. It is not about the action-packed, game-winning shots on the ice; it is about the secret texts and shared looks between Hollander and Rozanov. Their decade-long, slow-burn relationship full of "heated" moments is what keeps viewers glued to the screen.



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"In October, my roommate and I saw the trailer for it through Crave Canada and thought it looked so good," Pilon said. "We were like, 'Are we going to have to download a VPN?'"

Episode five, "I'll Believe in Anything," quickly went viral for its iconic moments and became the second TV episode ever to receive a [rare perfect 10 rating on IMDb](#). The episode features a gut-wrenching Russian monologue from Rozanov, Hollander's acceptance of his sexuality, the ground-breaking kiss Scott Hunter — team captain of the fictional New York Admirals — and his boyfriend Kip share publicly after Hunter's team wins the Stanley Cup and Rozanov's climactic, episode-ending line: "I'm coming to the cottage."

Hudson Williams, who plays Hollander, said on ["Andy Cohen Live"](#) that the series' vulnerable and intense moments have resulted in closeted professional athletes reaching out to the show's stars, Williams and Connor Storrie, who plays Rozanov, to share their stories.

Pilon said she hopes the show continues to help more people feel comfortable with their authentic selves.

"There are most likely people in those situations seeing this and seeing the outpouring of support and love," Pilon said. "Hopefully, the athletes at our school can potentially feel that and feel that this is a school and an environment where people are supportive of them and do love them, no matter what."

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"Heated Rivalry" has become a beacon of queer representation in a sport known for "locker room talk," and has also welcomed new communities to the world of hockey. According to a [SeatGeek article](#) published Jan. 16, in-between Nov. 28 and Dec. 23, the time in which the first and fifth episode were released, NHL tickets saw a 24% surge in average tickets sold per game and a 36% increase in revenue. Corcoran said she hopes the series' popularity will inspire viewers to take real action and stand up for the queer community outside of the hockey community.

"I think it's really important for us to sort of harness that momentum to do something more tangible," Corcoran said. "Just watching the show is a really important part of imagining a better future for ourselves, but I hope that it spurs people to take actual action — whether that be, you know, towards the NHL and its famously homophobic policies or joining protests about ICE. I really think and hope that it has the potential to spur people forward to make the world that we see in 'Heated Rivalry' a possibility in our world."

Fans will not have to wait too long to see the next chapter of Rozanov and Hollander's story. [Producers announced](#) that the series has been renewed for a second season, which will adapt Reid's sequel novel, "The Long Game."

Reid also announced that she will release the third installment of Rosanov and Hollander's story this year, according to a [Today article](#) published Jan. 12. The book, titled "Unrivaled," is set to release in September.

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