

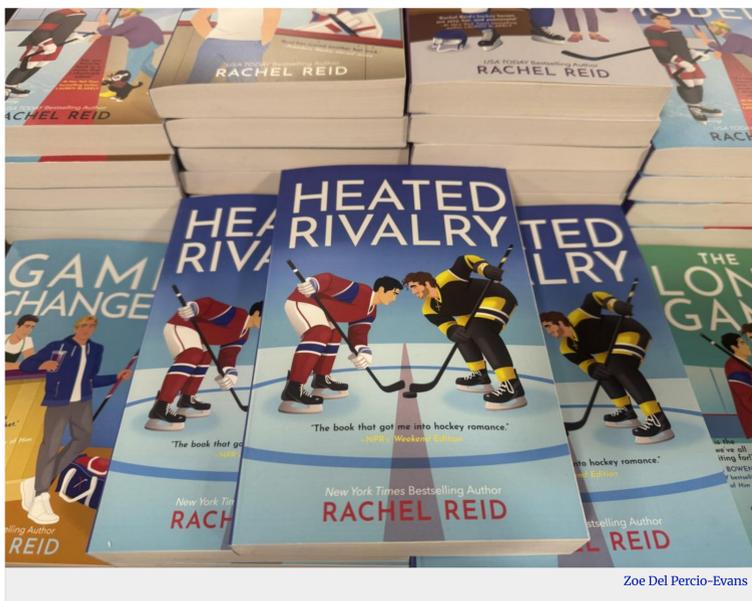
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Arts & Culture

‘Heated Rivalry’ sparks conversations on hockey and queer visibility

Khushi Gupta, Copy Editor
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“Heated Rivalry” the highly anticipated sports romance TV show based on the book by the same name, written by Rachel Reid, aired on HBO Max on Nov. 28, 2025 and quickly took the world by storm. The show chronicles the story of rival ice-hockey players Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov as they navigate their secret high-stakes romance where ambition wrestles with love.

The widespread success of the show is largely credited to the nuanced work of award-winning writer, director and producer Jacob Tierney, who is most known for his hit shows “Letterkenny” and “Shoresy”

Tierney’s adaptation was originally created for the Canadian streaming service Crave before being picked up by HBO Max just two weeks before its intended release. The show has been raking in views, quickly charting as the [most-watched](#) original series on Crave and the highest-rated non-animated acquired series on HBO Max.

Alongside director Tierney, who wrote and directed every episode, newcomers Hudson Williams cast as Hollander and Connor Storrie as Rozanov, captivated audiences with their sincere portrayal of the angst and longing reflected in the relationship. Audiences felt drawn to the actors’ relatively unknown faces and the conviction they brought to their characters’ exploration of intimacy, queerness and romance.

Even though the show had already appealed to fans of the original book series, it quickly grew in popularity and entered new areas of discourse. The intentional choices made by the director and the actors have prompted fans to analyze the show on an even deeper level.

Many fans of the show were impressed by the cinematography and the parallels in blocking, which were used to amplify emotional appeal and highlight the progression of the story. Valentina Vee, a director and cinematographer on TikTok, detailed the intricacies of the camerawork and how certain lenses were used to give the show a movie-like feel.

Apart from being a steamy queer sports romance, the show has gained popularity for challenging the NHL’s latent homophobia and uneasy relationship with diversity. CBC Canada reported that “As of 2025, the NHL remains the only major North American men’s sports league that’s never had an openly gay player compete in regular competition.”

François Arnaud, who plays Scott Hunter in the show, spoke about his hope for the NHL to support queer communities as they capitalize on the show’s widespread success.

“Their sales are going up, apparently, and the Boston Bruins tagged us in different clips online, and it’s getting incredible traction,” he told the radio on [Andy Cohen Live](#). “I’m just hoping that it’s backed up by actual openness to diversity.”

The NHL has not yet issued any statement addressing its stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion, but the series has already inspired Jesse Kortuem, a real hockey player, to come out as gay.

Kortuem has never competed in the NHL, but he played defenseman and center across multiple leagues.

“For a long time, however, the rink did not feel like a place where I could be all of me. I felt like I had to hide parts of myself for far too long,” Kortuem said in his coming-out statement.

The hockey star told [Out Magazine](#) that many of those in the hockey world, either closeted or openly gay, are impacted by the success and following that the show has garnered. “Never in my life did I think something so positive and loving could come from such a masculine sport,” Williams said on Andy Cohen Live, adding that closeted professional athletes have begun reaching out to Kortuem after the show’s release.

Following the success of the season and the demand for the adaptation of the couple’s next book, “Heated Rivalry” has been greenlit for a second season and filming will start this summer.

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