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TV

9 reasons everyone's still talking about 'Heated Rivalry'

Weeks after its finale, the incredible momentum around the show is still growing.

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Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in the gay romance drama "Heated Rivalry" on Crave. (Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max)

By Amber Dermont Moore, Jada Yuan, Nwamaka Okafor and Rachel Kaminsky

As "Heated Rivalry" stars Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams wind down promoting an sequel of the Golden Globes, much of that news, and a good portion of the world, has probably seen them naked. The meteoric rise of this gay romantic first season — based on the books by Rachel Reid depicting the secret, season-worthy romance between a pair of hockey players — has been accompanied by a flood of nudity, mostrous on HBO late last year. As has hubbies for previously unknown actors Storrie (who plays the bold, bisexual Russian Ilya Rozanov) and Williams (the sweetly anxious Canadian Shane Hollander). What's perhaps more fascinating right now, though, is how that momentum just keeps going — and growing.

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Themed club nights are taking place from Texas to D.C. A three-minute stage show in T.A.T.u's "All the Things She Said," a 13-year-old song used in the show's beloved "club scene," is happening listening to Taylor Swift's Tomphine Square Park. A book editor contacted us, of course, next. The announcement that Reid is writing a seventh book in her Game Changers series, also focused on Shane and Ilya, probably got most engagement from fan conversations online. And now people keep finding A. Williams on TikTok.

Over in one of our Style section Black rooms, a question about whether we should write about "Heated Rivalry" got 87 replies in, like, zero hours. If we can't stop talking about it, we haven't stopped thinking about it either. Here are nine reasons we're still obsessed. — Jada Yuan

It respects and likes jocks

I, for one, breathed a sigh of relief when I heard "Heated Rivalry" wasn't going to veer into stereotypical, cliched territory by having one of the two male couples be actually only ever interested in sex, go to grad school, or be a competitive ice dancer, but get pressured into the depressingly macho world of hockey coolness by hazing and Norms. No, these men are both fully queer and fully jocks. And because the show's creators and actors understand the sports world, I have to imagine if given dude-coded sports media — thinking especially of those charming "Empty Netters" and "What Chaos" gifs — an easy on-ramp to get in on the fun. — *Ashley Peters Muldrow*

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The chemistry between the leads lift, is off the charts

It's like "Heated Rivalry" all of about seven minutes of screen time to establish what Shane and Ilya's dynamic is. One's sweet and unassuming, and the other's a sexy mischief machine. Boy meets boy fortune of Williams and Storrie interacting as themselves has produced, within the first episode, a chemistry that shoots the charm in the show does translate offscreen. It's Storrie who looks to be smiley and shaken, and Williams who looks, in the Ilya mode in human form. I'm sure they'd say it wouldn't work if it — thinking specifically of those charming "Empty Netters" and "What Chaos" gifs — an easy on-ramp to get in on the fun. — *Ashley Peters Muldrow*

The sex is steamy, playful and more realistic than most

Ilya (L, at left) and Shane (R, at right) are on TV. (Sabrina Lantos/HBO)

Remember in "Call Me by Your Name" when Elio and Oliver start getting it on, and the camera pans out the window to ... a literal tree? That's the treatment of intimacy between men that many of us have come to expect from Hollywood. But since the gay sex of my generation watched "Queer as Folk" (also a Canadian co-production) in our parents' basements has been such suffocating and detailed depictions of gay sex on TV. Oral, frottage, power play, negotiating positions — these are not the sort of dynamics we're used to seeing reflected in media that also includes romance, family and public life. The combination feels revolutionary. — *Nazeen Kumar*

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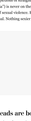

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It's from Canada, not Hollywood

Canadian streamer Crave and its parent company, Bell Media, fully funded "Heated Rivalry," which led to a singular final product. As showrunner Jacob Tierney confessed to The Washington Post last month, procuring American backing would have meant ceding creative control. Tierney and his cast and crew made the most of the freedom to make a film they actually wanted to see, and "Tierney cited. How changes would have dinghied off the more unusual elements of the show's structure, cut or watered some of the aforementioned sex scenes and otherwise granted it the kind of someone that makes so much streaming content forgettable. Hey there's a lesson for future adaptations: "Find the people that love [the source material] and let them make it, instead of getting a group of people together with a thousand pages of notes to tell you everything that's wrong with it." — *Maybe that's the Canadian way.* — *Rachel Kaminsky*

It's sexy AND wholesome

"Heated Rivalry" says sure-all with an impressive tour of graphic sex scenes, but its transformation over the course of the season from raunchy to romantic is both gradual and thorough. The same shows that gave us illicit locker room encounters in episodes one and two also gave us a tender moment between Shane and Ilya in a hot tub, a romantic weekend in Paris and a gorgeous, sweet, playful and more realistic bedroom scene. Sex is a tender and sophisticated home run. — *R.K.*

It's a romance among consenting equals

A love story between Shane, who realizes he's gay, and Ilya, who's bisexual — both at the top of their professional field — allows women to wish into a fantasy where it feels as if there's no chance of anything resting into a creepy or scary gray area we often fear. At least that's one of the theories for the growing popularity of "Spicy" — a Japanese term for female fans of romantic stories centered on men. The cruelty and humiliation that always seems to be waiting around the corner in so many depictions of straight relationships there's looking at you, "Fifty Shades of Grey" — is not present in these romantic imaginings, no chance of sexual violence, from voyeurism to cuckoldry and zoosexual. Nothing worse than that. — *J.Y.*

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The leads are both 'mainstream hot'

The explosion of streaming services in the 2020s brought a welcome range of LGBTQ+ stories, but none have broken through like "Heated Rivalry." One look at the nemeses turned lovebirds and the appeal is obvious: Young, jacked (in men fit the dominant ideals broadly revered in the U.S.) and mainstream hot, Shane and Ilya look more like stars than any other letter in the queer alphabet. While you're at it, HBO, check out another Canadian import acquired by the network, "Bad Girls" from creator and star Bilal Baig, about a genderfluid millennial finding their way into adulthood. The protagonist doesn't play pro sports, but the series is a tender and sophisticated home run. — *R.K.*

It frees romance from the tyranny of clever banter

It's time for us to admit that what counts as witty repartee in many modern romances is milquetoast. I learn nothing about the characters, their growing interest in one another or the stakes of the story when they exchange lines like "Fuck you" "Fuck you back" in "Fifty Shades of Grey," or first are the characters connect with this words. When they finally open up to each other, it speaks volumes about their changing dynamic and their newfound ability to acknowledge their true feelings. It turns the "will they, won't they" dynamic on its head. After all, we're not waiting for them to kiss. Instead, we're rooting for them to use their words as well as their bodies to express themselves. — *R.K.*

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There's a palpable sense of discovery

Plenty of shows have a paracosmal fandom, but what's made film-one's so endearing is the deep satisfaction we get from hearing "Discovered" R. Stupid Reid's "is a low-budget word-of-mouth phenomenon. It dropped on HBO with almost no publicity because, well, the network realized what it had: only three weeks before its premiere. The stars' first sub-carpet acting linked like it was in the basement of a mall. Watching the actors get recognition (they were previously working in food service) and navigate their incredible realities (no with humility allows us to feel a sense of ownership. To quote a phrase I've seen many times on X, "We saw it first and we liked it before it was cool" — and we liked it before it was cool. Some of Williams, a biracial Korean-Canadian who would've had a much harder time breaking into the industry without this boost. — *J.Y.*

What readers are saying

The ongoing popularity and the engagement of "Heated Rivalry" can be attributed to its authenticity, its boldness in portraying a gay romance between athletes, its wit and its unique narrative that changes from traditional heteronormative structures. The story is compelling.

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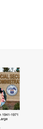

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