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# Capitals As ‘Heated Rivalry’ takes off, the NHL faces questions about inclusion

The hit show about a romance between two professional hockey players has brought new fans to a sport that has struggled to welcome the LGBTQ+ community.  
Today at 5:00 a.m. EST

By Bailey Johnson

Rue Tercero grew up a Washington Capitals fan, introduced to the game by her father — long before the runaway success of the television show “Heated Rivalry.”

Tercero’s girlfriend, Cara Barry, needed a little prodding to give the show, based on Rachel Reid’s book, a chance.

“I didn’t know anything about the books. I didn’t know it existed until I saw it on social media, as many people have,” Barry said on the concourse at Capital One Arena earlier this month, moments before puck drop of the first hockey game she attended. “And I thought, ‘Well, I’m not super into hockey, like, why would I be into this?’ But then my roommate and my girlfriend said, ‘We’re going to sit down and watch the show. You’re going to love it.’ And then I ended up loving it.”

It was Pride Night for the Washington Capitals when Barry and Tercero came to the arena. Tercero, who called hockey a “huge part” of her life, is deeply embedded now in fan communities on social media.

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Because of the show, she now gets to share her love with Barry.

“I like the sport better,” Tercero said. “‘Heated Rivalry’ is good, too. But the sport is pretty solid.”

Even those who loved “Heated Rivalry” from the beginning — who read the book long before it [became a TV sensation](#), or who eagerly anticipated the TV show before it went viral across social media — didn’t see this coming.

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The romance novel centers on two professional hockey players, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, and uses the sport as the backdrop for the intensifying entanglement, and eventual deep relationship, between the two rivals. But, as popular as Reid’s book is and as successful as the show has been, the growing enthusiasm for the actual sport of hockey still caught the die-hard “Heated Rivalry” fans by surprise.

The ticket sales platform StubHub reported a [40 percent increase in interest in hockey tickets](#) while “Heated Rivalry” was airing on Crave in Canada and HBO Max in the United States. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman watched the show. “I binged it in one night,” Bettman said during a visit to D.C. in mid-January. “I thought the storyline was very compelling.”

NHL teams are leaning in, referencing the show on social media and using songs from the soundtrack inside their arenas.

Several Capitals players displayed rainbow tape on their sticks during warm-ups as part of Pride Night against the Florida Panthers on Jan. 17. (Geoff Burke/Imagn Images)

With the momentum for growth in fandom among the LGBTQ+ community, though, comes questions from new fans — and from those who have seen the NHL’s missteps before — about just how meaningfully they’ll be embraced by the sport.

“As a new fan, I was genuinely surprised how close-minded so many of these hockey fans are,” Barry said. “Like, coming from a show as gay as ‘Heated Rivalry’, I went into, Twitter and Instagram and so many of these fans are so homophobic, transphobic, and they want nothing to do with the community at all.”

Added Laynie-Rose Rizer, a longtime hockey fan and the events manager at East City Bookshop in Washington: “I saw in Montreal, they played the commercials for ‘Heated Rivalry’ on the Jumbotron at some of the games. And I was like, ‘That’s so crazy, and that’s kind of cool, and also makes me terrified.’ Like, is this just another way of pandering to people, or do we actually care?”

François Arnaud, one of the actors on “Heated Rivalry,” recently called on the NHL to do more than provide lip service around inclusion.

“Their sales are going up, apparently,” Arnaud said in an [interview with Andy Cohen on SiriusXM](#). “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---.”

Leah Nentwig and Grace Clennon, best friends, flew from Minnesota to see the Capitals, aligning their trip to overlap with Washington’s Pride Night. Both have a history with hockey that predates “Heated Rivalry,” and both have seen how the popularity of the show has brought more eyes and attention to hockey.

Nentwig, the self-described president of Capitals winger Brandon Duhaime’s fan club, brought a sign to the game that read, “Hey Dewey, puck/stick 4 Pride?” Duhaime briefly left the ice after warm-ups, then returned to give Nentwig a signed stick, with the blade wrapped in rainbow Pride tape.

Need to talk about how Brandon left warmups and then came back just to give me the stick signed..... I am seriously so grateful and I need you all to know that this is such a core memory and will be forever I LOVE BRANDON DUHAIME  
[pic.twitter.com/22DUHAIME](https://twitter.com/22DUHAIME)  
— leahve (@22DUHAIME) January 18, 2026

For a few months in 2023, the NHL enacted a ban on Pride tape that would have prevented Duhaime — and the large handful of other Capitals who used it on their sticks in warm-ups during Pride Night — from making the gesture. The ban occurred alongside the NHL’s decision to [eliminate specialty jerseys for warm-ups](#), like the Pride-themed ones teams typically wore, then auctioned off, in a show of support during their Pride game. Eventually, the NHL reversed course on specialty stick tape, but jerseys remain off-limits.

After several high-profile incidents in which players refused to wear the Pride jersey, the NHL decided in June 2023 to ban all specialty jerseys. Bettman has since insisted that the ban wasn’t specifically targeting Pride jerseys, since it swept across all causes, including jerseys for military night, Hockey Fights Cancer and any other cause a team wanted to support.

“That whole issue seems to be mistaken,” Bettman said recently in Washington. “It wasn’t about Pride jerseys or Pride tape. It was about the fact of bringing things into the game that might not be embraced by the players wearing the jersey.”

For many fans, the decision was felt deeply and painfully as they grappled with their role inside the game.

“Obviously it’s not just the Pride jerseys. But I would like to see them come back just because it does mean a lot to people like me to see the players that I love to watch and feel welcome in that space,” Nentwig said. “And when [Bettman] took away those jerseys, it kind of made me take a step back and really think to myself, like, ‘What am I supporting?’”

Seeing Duhaime and several of his teammates, including forwards Dylan Strome, Nic Dowd, Connor McMichael and Hendrix Lapierre, defensemen John Carlson and Trevor van Riemsdyk and goaltender Logan Thompson, use the Pride tape in warm-ups meant far more to Nentwig, Clennon and others than just a simple strip of tape.

“It’s really nice to see so many people using Pride tape,” Clennon said, “and really acknowledging that. Especially seeing Dylan Strome just being, like, so open and inviting and kind of interacting with fans like that is really cool.”

Dylan strome taping his stick [pic.twitter.com/1ZnvroF35](https://pic.twitter.com/1ZnvroF35)  
— leahve (@22DUHAIME) January 17, 2026

For Tercero, seeing former Capitals goaltender Braden Holtby march in the [D.C. Pride parade](#) in 2016 was deeply important.

“There was a while there where I was like, I love this sport, but I can’t get too into it because I’m queer and it’s going to be a whole big thing,” Tercero said. “... I can’t express how much Braden Holtby has done for the D.C. queer community and developing hockey and queerness together. He’s, like, the biggest ally, I think, I could ever know.”

But a common perception from fans is that while individual players showing their support carries significant weight, the decisions made by the NHL at a leaguewide level still lack meaningful support of the LGBTQ+ community.

Capitals center Dylan Strome was one of several players displaying rainbow tape on his stick during Pride Night. (Geoff Burke/Imagn Images)

“I would like to see them make actual systemic changes to the league, actual structural changes, being more involved in Pride Nights, not bending to all the folks and taking away jerseys on the ice,” Rizer said. “I would like to see them actually supporting queer organizations with monetary support, because it’s so easy for them to take the money of new fans that are embracing the league and then not do anything to actually make it a safer space.”

Tercero’s hockey fandom has endured, even without always feeling embraced by the sport.

“Mostly it’s not even about acceptance,” Tercero said. “It’s just about acknowledging, like, knowing that we’re going to be here. Like, you taking away Pride jerseys and stuff and trying to ban Pride tape isn’t going to stop us from being part of hockey and having this space that we feel comfortable in.”

## Washington Capitals

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