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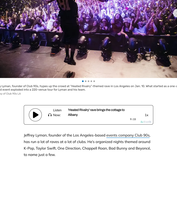
'Heated Rivalry' rave brings the cottage to Albany

Inspired by the hit series, "Heated Rivalries" have become a place for fans of the gay hockey romance series to gather

By Katherine Kinesling Staff Writer
Feb 18, 2026



Jeffrey Lyman, founder of Club 90s, hopes to the crowd at "Heated Rivalry" themed cruise in Los Angeles on Jan. 30. What started as a one-off event has grown into a 2,500-seat party for partial and fully heated.
Courtesy of Club 90s

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A Time: 1 Heated Rivalry' rave brings the cottage to Albany 3x 0:00 / 0:00

Jeffrey Lyman, founder of the Los Angeles-based events company Club 90s, has run a lot of oceans in a lot of pools. He's organized nights themed around K-Pop, Taylor Swift, One Direction, Chappell Roan, Bad Bunny and Beyoncé, to name just a few.

Yet nothing has compared to his current endeavor. A series of "Heated Rivalries" events based on the pop culture juggernaut "Heated Rivalry", Albany's Empire Live will host a local "Heated Rivalries" on Friday.

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If You Go

Club 90s presents: "Heated Rivalries"

Where: Empire Live, 55 North Pitch, Albany
When: 9 p.m. on Friday
Tickets: $25 in advance and must have ID
More info: empirelivealbany.com

"I had never experienced that much energy in a room ever — and I've been DJing for 30 years now," said Lyman.

Under hazy club lights, packed crowds of hockey jersey-clad attendees swap trading cards of the fictional players and friendship bracelets. There's dancing to fan-edited montages of the show and its stars. Sometimes drag performers pop up. And at the room's core is a gay hockey romance that broke streaming records for HBO Max and the Canadian streaming service Crave catapulted its young, unknown leads into superstardom and sparked a joyful, global fandom.

"Heated Rivalry" showrunner and director Jacob Tierney of "Letterkenny" and "Shining" fame adapted the first two books in author Rachel Reid's "Game Changers" series for the first season. The story follows two hockey stars, Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie, masking his native Texan roots with a Russian accent). Over a decade, their competitiveness on the ice flows into a passionate romance carried out in secrecy. At the same time, fellow pro hockey player Scott Hunter (François Arnaud) is wrestling with the risk of coming out as a prominent figure in the NHL, the series' stand-in for the NHL.

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Though Lyman was an instant fan of "Heated Rivalry" — "It's a perfect show to me," he said — he didn't consider it the ripe cultural moment and into Club 90s Club to request a themed event. The show has notable needle drops, but music isn't necessarily a prominent element, explained Lyman. But when the eager fan suggested he look into the fan edits swirling around TikTok, something clicked.

Lyman and a friend quickly pulled together a "Heated Rivalry" rave to fill a last-minute vacancy at an L.A. venue in mid-January. The party may have been less than half full, but thanks to attendees sharing clips on social media, "it literally became famous everything."

"It was probably 100 videos that went viral overnight. I've never seen anything like that in my life," Lyman recalled. "Then all the requests started coming in, and so I went crazy for the following two weeks booking more and more and more shows. I didn't know how I was going to pull them off because I only have five DJs on my team."

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Club 90s's "Heated Rivalries" have become a gathering place for fans of "Heated Rivalry" (Courtesy of Club 90s Los)

The second L.A. show, which Lyman considers "the actual first," sold out. Club 90s ended up hiring 25 more DJs to help meet the demand, which skyrocketed to its current, ongoing 2,500-club tour.

Locally, Ryan Bensing hosted a "Heated Rivalry"-themed trivia night on Feb. 18. Though Bond's trivia nights are usually ticket-free, Cassidy Proctor, co-owner of Evermore Hall shows the Canadian series and the organizer of the "Heated Rivalry" night knows this one would be different based on the internet's obsession with the series. She made tickets available for the night, and they sold out in less than 48 hours.

"I finished the show in, I don't know, three days and the books, honestly, in 48 hours," Proctor said. "I was obsessed. I could not stop it ... I'm just everyone on to the series who will listen to me talk about it."

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For Albany resident Val Jones, the queer romance was a major pull, along with Tierney and hockey, a sport they've watched since childhood.

"I know a lot of people started watching it because they're like, 'Cute boys, and they're going to do it,' and I was just more like, 'I hope there's a good love story,'" Jones said.

That's because Jones, who is in their early 40s, "grew up in the peak of the 'boys year great' trope." The concept, which has roots in early decency laws and media-focused morality rules, including Hollywood's Hays Code, encompasses the unhappy and sometimes violent ending queer characters face in contrast to their fellow straight characters. Think Larry and Tara in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," Lance in "The L Word," the entire plot of "Cruising" and the finale of "Killing Eve."

In "Heated Rivalry," the boys are confronting homophobia in professional hockey. Currently, the NHL remains one of the only North American men's professional leagues to have no openly gay players, and the sport has been criticized for its hypermasculine culture.

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But there is also joy and — spoiler alert — happy endings. Ilya and Shane continue to be successful athletes. We see them flirt. Parental support flows after characters come out. They go to the college. And when the cute boys do get around to doing it, it's full of consent and tenderness.

"Heated Rivalry" was Proctor's, "first time really being introduced to queer needle." She has since sought out more, including Taylor Jenkins Reid's "Atmosphere," which traces a lesbian romance between astronauts, and the television series "Fellow Travelers" starring Matt Bomer and Jonathan Bailey. She hopes the series encourages more straight fans to seek out queer love stories.

Ingrid Pyles, an Albany-based therapist, first learned of the series through a TikTok clip of the gym scene. All of the yearning between Shane and Ilya in that short video initially drew them in. They binged the first three episodes — the only ones available at the time — and then read the entire "Game Changers" series while waiting a week for the fourth episode to drop.

Though the romance was the initial draw for Pyles — they are a big fan of the genre and count "Outlander" as another favorite for its pining plotlines — their connection with "Heated Rivalry" quickly deepened. The series "reminded me about the kind of excitement I had in my 20s, the same age as the characters," Pyles said. In chasing the feeling watching episode one gave them, Pyles began writing again and penned a 70,000-word romance novel based on a "fantasized version" of their life.

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"Heated Rivalry" has also resonated with neurodivergent watchers. Pyles and Jones, who are both neurodivergent, connected with Shane's portrayal of autism. Though the character isn't explicitly autistic (there is no mention of a diagnosis), author Reid has confirmed he is written to be. There are tells in his wall-leaning, emotional expressive and comfort drink of choice, ginger ale.

"Hoffway through the first episode, I'm like, 'This kid is autistic.' We're going to have an autistic love interest where being autistic isn't his main personality trait. It isn't the main focus of everything. We're going to have a queer story where the main character is not the stereotypical gay man. He's just a guy who he is, and it is an important part of who he is, but people aren't bonding him with kid gloves on, or acting like he's so amazing because of the fact that this is who he is."

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"Heated Rivalry" became a breakout hit thanks to its embrace of queer joy, much-touted characters and the fandom it created. (Warner Bros. Discovery/Crave)

Pyles, whose clientele is largely queer and/or neurodivergent, has suggested "Heated Rivalry" to many of their clients because of its character depictions.

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"It was nice to see emotional vulnerability and successfully artificial in male gaze," Pyles said. "No one had to be rescued. Nobody had a breakdown over it. They just supported each other. It was gritty at times. It was never perfect, but it was perfect for them."

For Jones, Pyles and Proctor, "Heated Rivalry" permeated pop culture because it was a perfect storm. It came at a time when people were craving "something to latch onto because the end of the year into the beginning of this year, it was like every day you were waking up to something terrible happening" and "sometimes you just need something to ground yourself and remind you that there's something good in the world," Jones said. Having all episodes land during the holidays, a peak time for streaming, helped, too.

Casting Williams and Storrie — two unknowns — also contributed the three said. Proctor related their off-screen friendship to that of "Michael" stars Arsenio Cerda and Cynthia Erivo, two actors who "went through the big thing together and have this emotional connection that some people might not understand."

"Connor and Hudson have this really sweet, platonic friendship," Proctor said. "They can be emotional, vulnerable and losing towards one another and I feel like that's not always portrayed in male friendships. I think it should be, and I think it's healthy, and I think it's beautiful."

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Lyman understands the emotional impact of not only the show but the community it's created. One night, as the crowd roared over a clip of Shane coming out, Lyman "broke down onstage and started bawling." His own experience "wasn't the best," but such sorrow and support for things he "fought for first, while he's still alive, I can't put into words for a little moments."

At each "Heated Rivalries," Lyman invokes "all the LGBTQ kids" onstage. For some — like a young woman attending the rave in Knoxville, Tenn. — the thrum of the hockey jersey-clad crowd of mostly strangers becomes a safe space for their own coming out.

"Moments like that — you don't know if any of this is going to happen, and then it does. It's so beautiful and encouraging to have a small part in allowing these people to be their authentic selves," Lyman said.

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