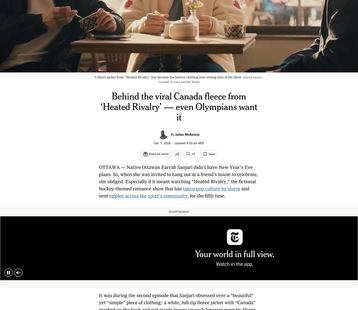

A fleece jacket from "Heated Rivalry" has become the hottest clothing item among fans of the show. Sabrina Lantos / Courtesy of Crave and Bell Media

Behind the viral Canada fleece from 'Heated Rivalry' — even Olympians want it

By Julian McKenzie
Staff Writer, Toronto

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OTTAWA — Native Ottawan Farrah Sanjari didn't have New Year's Eve plans. So, when she was invited to hang out at a friend's house to celebrate, she obliged. Especially if it meant watching "Heated Rivalry," the fictional hockey-themed romance show that has taken pop culture by storm and sent ripples across the sport's community, for the fifth time.

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It was during the second episode that Sanjari obsessed over a "beautiful" yet "simple" piece of clothing: a white, full-zip fleece jacket with "Canada" marked on the back and red maple leaves on each forearm worn by Shane Hollander, one of the main characters.

Hollander, portrayed by actor Hudson Williams, is a Canadian hockey player in a secret relationship with Russian rival Ilya Rozanov. In the episode, titled "Olympiques," Hollander is representing Canada at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, donning the jacket to show off his national allegiance. Hollander isn't doing anything special beyond subtly showcasing the jacket while talking to his teammates at a café or watching a figure skating event from the stands.

"It wasn't this flashy piece of merchandise," Sanjari said. "It was something that was very understated, but proudly Canadian."

That night, Sanjari created a Change.org petition advocating for the jacket to be made into the real thing for this year's Winter Games in Milan Cortina.

Sanjari's petition was the culmination of online clamoring for the garment to be made available, with some fans taking to Instagram comment sections demanding the Canadian Olympic team release the fleece. Over 6,000 people signed Sanjari's petition to make the jacket a reality.

In response, Canadian outfitter Province of Canada announced on Jan. 28 that it would be producing the famed fleece jacket and donating some proceeds to an unnamed charity. The release date of the fleece has also yet to be revealed.

"We're so excited to partner with Province of Canada," said Jacob Tierney and Brendan Brady, the show's creator and executive producer, via a statement online. "As a Canadian-based, independent apparel brand that does amazing work sourcing and manufacturing high-quality clothing, we share a common ethos. We look forward to bringing it to life with the creativity and care fans expect."

Shane Hollander wears his Canada fleece in only a few scenes during the second episode of the show. Sabrina Lantos / Courtesy of Crave and Bell Media

Despite appearing on-screen for only a few scenes, the Canada jacket has become a must-have ahead of this year's Olympic Games. It's the latest piece of "Heated Rivalry"-related merch mania to hear that distinction.

"It represents people's attachment to the show more than anything else," said "Heated Rivalry" costume designer Hanna Puley. Puley designed the zip-up sweater using patches and a fleece made by Montreal-based supplier Kerosilla Tee. "I think it's kind of amazing to have something that … ends up feeling iconic of a set of values and of a sense of belonging."

Puley has worked in the Canadian film and television industry as a costume and production designer for nearly a decade and was hired by Tierney and Brady as an independent contractor. The jacket was "one of 100 looks" made for Hollander's character throughout the series.

"I moved on with my life and with the job," Puley said. "So, ultimately, what I'm most surprised by is just how much people are leaning into the sense of belonging, in that shared excitement.

"The jacket is so simple. The jacket doesn't have anything that remarkable about it. And maybe that's why it's so easy to see yourself in it. Anyone can wear it, so it doesn't (feel) like anything that's too challenging."

Fans of the show have made their own Canada fleece jackets.

That includes Sportsnet host and former hockey player Aliesh Forfar, who created her own jacket in nearly four hours with help from her mother, Sophia. Forfar bought a few fleece jackets from L.L. Bean, Sporting Life and H&M, ordered red letters from a seller on Etsy and maple leaf patches from Fabricland, a Canadian retailer.

Upon completion, Forfar posted her video on TikTok. Within an hour, she received requests, including from her friend and Team Canada forward Laura Stacey, as well as from Canadian captain Marie-Philip Poulin.

"Well, we've got two important orders," Forfar told her mom.

An Olympic kayaking gold medalist turned politician has gotten in on the fun, too. Canada's Secretary of State (Sport), Adam van Koeverden, wore the jacket in Parliament and spoke in support of "Heated Rivalry" recently.

"Well, it speaks volumes to the power and influence of Canadian television," van Koeverden said last month. "We are, statistically, the safest place for 2SLGBTQ people around the world. We're also the most hockey-loving nation in the world. So, what better country to have that conversation to actively engage in the media sphere around it and to promote stories, and to tell stories that are extremely relevant to Canadians? It's not just entertainment, it's art. And it's tremendously important."

But none may be more fortunate than Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, who was given the original jacket by Williams at an event in Ottawa late last month.

The original Canada fleece from the show were belongs to Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney. Courtesy of Prime Minister Mark Carney's Instagram / Courtesy of Crave and Bell Media

"There's also another still where he's fully holding on to the fleece," Sanjari said. "And he's just the most ecstatic person ever. Honestly, that was every single fan right there that he embodied watching the show. It felt so wonderful being Canadian in that moment."

And some hope that Carney's embrace of the show through the fleece can lead to more investment in similar Canadian film and media projects.

"If Mark Carney can get behind wearing the show-stopping piece from our show," Puley said. "I hope you can also support spending a little bit more money into the arts and culture budget for the country, too."

Until Province of Canada announces the release date of the fleece, fans will be left to make their own. Forfar is hoping to have her jackets made for Stacey and Poulin by the time she flies to Milan for the Olympics in a few days.

"I hope I can get it done for them in time," Forfar said.

By Julian McKenzie
Staff Writer, Toronto

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Julian McKenzie is an NHL staff writer and contributor to the NHL's news and analysis team. He covers the Ottawa Senators, Toronto Maple Leafs and Canadian with The Athletic's Chris Johnston. McKenzie is also the writer of the upcoming book, Black Aces, on Black hockey players and people. McKenzie's work can also be found in The New York Times, FourthLeight, the Montreal Gazette, the Canadian Press, TSN 690, CTV Montreal and more. Follow Julian on Twitter @JulianMckenzie

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