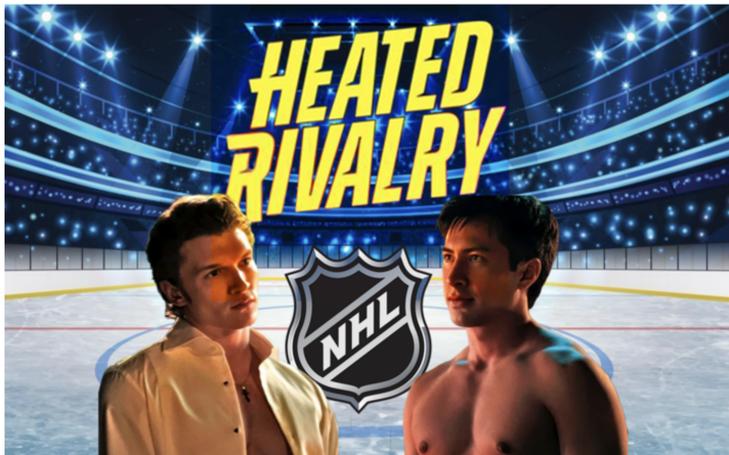


Heated Rivalry is changing sports culture on and off the ice

By Scarlett Heikkila / February 18, 2026



Graphic Peyton Rhoda

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Since its debut in late November, “Heated Rivalry” has become a pop culture sensation. Between endless TikTok edits and raunchy Instagram photoshoots, it’s almost impossible not to stumble upon the discourse surrounding this show.

What began as an adaptation of Rachel Reid’s “Game Changers” novels has grown into a phenomenon that speaks not only to hockey fans, but to broader conversations about identity, masculinity, and inclusion, challenging the ways society and viewers think about sports.

At its heart, “Heated Rivalry” follows the secret, decade-long romance between two professional hockey players, Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), navigating love in the rugged, hyper-masculine world of professional hockey.

The series doesn’t shy away from sensuality or vulnerability, and its honest portrayal of queer joy within a space [historically resistant to LGBTQ+ inclusion](#) has resonated widely.

It quickly became the [No. 1 acquired scripted series](#) on HBO Max and has brought in over [10.6 million viewers](#) in the U.S. to date. But its impact goes far beyond ratings.

One immediate effect of the series’s popularity has been the [diversification of the hockey audience](#). Fans who never engaged with hockey, including queer viewers and women, have started attending games, following NHL storylines, and engaging with the sport on social media in ways unseen a year ago. SeatGeek said that ticket sales for hockey [went up 20%](#) after the show first aired. Analysts believe “Heated Rivalry” has sparked more interest in the NHL and hockey in general.

This renewed sense of belonging feels especially significant, given how recently many [LGBTQ+ fans](#) felt pushed to the margins because of the NHL’s homophobic history.

The NHL found itself at the [center of controversy](#) in 2023 after announcing that players would no longer be permitted to wear specialty warmup jerseys, including those designed for Pride Nights. The decision followed a handful of players across different teams declining to participate in Pride-themed warmups, citing personal or religious beliefs.

Rather than addressing those individual choices on a case-by-case basis, the league responded with a sweeping policy change: no more Pride jerseys, no more Pride tape, no more visible statements of support during warmups. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman [defended the policy](#) as a way to avoid “distractions” and maintain focus on the game. The fallout was immediate.

Some LGBTQ+ fans and advocacy groups called the league out for making it clear that their inclusion was conditional. The league’s attempt to sidestep conflict actually amplified it, reinforcing the perception that hockey remains uneasy with overt expressions of queer solidarity.

This battle between institutional hesitation and cultural demand is where “Heated Rivalry” has left its biggest mark.

The most significant impact of “Heated Rivalry” lies in how it portrays queerness within a traditionally conservative sporting environment. Men’s hockey, like most professional sports leagues, has been dominated by displays of stoicism and hypermasculinity.

There are currently [no openly gay men](#) playing in any major American professional sports league. Aside from Carl Nassib, who made history as the first active NFL player to come out, but has since retired, and Luke Prokop, who plays in the American Hockey League.

“Heated Rivalry” completely disrupts that script. Instead of framing queer stories through the oversaturated lens of trauma or tragedy, the show centers itself around love, joy, desire, and emotional complexity. Two male athletes express love and tenderness not in spite of their masculinity, but alongside it. This challenges deep-rooted norms about masculinity in sports culture, and has sparked lots of online discussion regarding how to dismantle this system.

Queer athletes at Emerson have noticed this shift due to the show’s popularity. First-year Lizi Horning of the women’s volleyball team said that “there definitely have been changes in sports culture in general.”

“I definitely feel seen because I had closeted experiences in the past within sports, and it feels good that other people can also feel seen, especially those who are still closeted,” she said.

Emerson already has an accepting sports culture, so Horning has not felt any profound effect on playing sports on campus. Instead, she hopes that “Heated Rivalry” is “pushing Pride forward for other sports, and ... that the NHL and other leagues can actually embrace it,” Horning said.

As a sports fan herself, it is exciting to imagine Pride evolving beyond a cash grab or seasonal trend, and instead becoming an intentional commitment to building a more inclusive culture.

This impact spans far past collegiate athletes. Williams, the actor who plays Shane Hollander in the show, has said that he [received Instagram DMs](#) from multiple professional athletes who are still closeted, thanking him for the show’s representation.

Representation matters, but what is even more powerful is the audience’s embrace of the storyline. The enthusiastic response from fans and media signals that viewers are not only ready for this shift in sports, but they are actively welcoming it and urging the change. For athletes watching quietly from the sidelines, this could provide an added layer of reassurance that sports culture is ready for the change.

“Heated Rivalry” functions as more than entertainment. It serves as a catalyst for necessary change in an outdated sports culture by bringing in new audiences, reframing masculinity, and normalizing queer presence within professional sports. This series is pressuring leagues like the NHL to reconsider how they market their sport and who they imagine their fanbase to be.

If sports have long prided themselves on tradition, “Heated Rivalry” proves that tradition is not immovable. Culture shifts when audiences want it, and right now, those audiences are demanding a version of sports that makes room for everyone.

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