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Will 'Heated Rivalry' do for Olympic ice hockey what Taylor Swift did for the Super Bowl?

HBO's gay hockey romance series was a breakout hit—and it's already boosting ticket sales for the sport, just in time for Milan's Winter Games.

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[Photos: HBO Max, Gregory Shamus/Getty Images]

BY **JENNIFER MATTSON**

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HBO Max's *Heated Rivalry*, a gay hockey romance TV series based on the *Game Changers* book series by Rachel Reid, is the breakout hit no one saw coming. With almost no promotion, it quickly became one of the most talked-about streaming TV shows in the U.S. after HBO Max purchased the rights from Canada's Crave network this November, turning its two costars, Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie, into overnight celebrities.

What's unique about *Heated Rivalry* is just how fast its popularity has spread, and how devoted its massive fan base is. From the week it debuted to its season finale six episodes later, its viewership grew from **30 million to 324 million streaming minutes**, according to the data and research firm Luminate, per *The New York Times*.

The story is about two rival hockey players who fall in love: Canadian Shane Hollander and Russian Ilya Rozanov. It is a slow-burn romance spanning a decade, and includes explicit sexual scenes—which some attribute to the great success of the series. Writer-director-producer Jacob Tierney has described the show as “**pure queer joy**.”

Now, those die-hard romance fans—mostly women and gay men—have an unlikely new interest: ice hockey. It sets the stage for what looks like the newest audience crossover from entertainment to sports, after Taylor Swift fans found football a few years ago when the singer began dating Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce (now her fiancé). Swift is estimated to have generated over \$1 billion in publicity and revenue for the NFL, according to a *MarketWatch* report.

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THE HEATED RIVALRY EFFECT

Turning to ice hockey, ticket reseller SeatGeek says interest in hockey has surged, thanks to *Heated Rivalry*. And that could translate into increased viewing for the Olympics.

“The Winter Olympics always cause interest to spike for hockey, and this time demand is already at a fever pitch following the breakout success of *Heated Rivalry*,” Chris Leyden, SeatGeek's director of growth **marketing**, tells *Fast Company*.

“After the show's first episodes aired, we saw weekly hockey ticket sales on SeatGeek jump more than 20%, with revenue up over 30%,” Leyden adds. “It's certainly great for the NHL that hockey is top of mind for the broader American public for such an extended period.”

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