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Editor's Pick

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'Heated Rivalry' carries queer representation into the mainstream at levels never seen before

Jordana DiPalermo, news correspondent

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Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie, left) and Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) answer questions at a post-game press conference. "Heated Rivalry" became a catalyst for bringing queer representation into mainstream media. Photo courtesy Sabrina Lantos, HBO Max.

One of the most heated discussions on the internet right now is about the Canadian-produced television series "Heated Rivalry," based on author Rachel Reid's "Game Changers" book series. A clandestine rivals-to-lovers romance, this steamy show has sparked global obsession and a tight-knit community of fans.

The show follows the hidden love story of professional hockey players Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) and Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams). The first season spans 10 years, starting with the pair's initial meeting.

"Heated Rivalry" has elevated LGBTQ+ representation to new heights.

"I've never seen a queer show go so mainstream and be so well received," said Jessie Speidel, a first-year design and theatre combined major at Northeastern.

Queer media has historically faced polarization in the mainstream. "Heated Rivalry" is not only the work of Reid — it is the culmination of a decades-long push for queer representation. The series might not have reached this level of success without shows such as "Fellow Travelers," "Heartstopper" and "Young Royals" paving the way.

"A lot of people are just now discovering a genre of media that has been present for years," said Chloe Alvather, a second-year public relations major at Northeastern.

Media representation centering LGBTQ+ characters is increasing, but that has not always been the case. "When I came out as bisexual in high school, I realized a lot of popular media rarely centered around gay characters," Alvather said.

The representation depicted in "Heated Rivalry" allows Gen Z to see themselves on screen in ways previous generations of queer youth never had. Across TikTok, LGBTQ+ millennials are sharing stories about the difference it would have made to have a show like "Heated Rivalry" when they were young athletes.

After years of suppression and silencing, more media focusing on queer stories means more openings for positive change.

"I've always believed LGBTQ+ stories need to be told, especially in a society where so much of gay culture is silenced or not celebrated enough," Alvather said.

This love story extends beyond just the romance in the show; it climbs into the depth of the characters. Over the course of the show, Boston-based player Rozanov faces familial issues in his Russian household that go beyond his queer experience. His father has dementia, and he struggles with his relationship with his brother. Montreal player Shane Hollander struggles with anxiety and, as Reid has confirmed, is autistic.

"I think the portrayal of two people of the same sex being in love and having various external issues surrounding not only their relationship but their own personal lives was something I could connect with," said Michelle Mercado, a first-year public relations major at Northeastern.



Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams, left) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) prepare the puck drop at a hockey game. The television series was based on a book by author Rachel Reid also named "Heated Rivalry." Photo courtesy Sabrina Lantos, HBO Max.

The show is being discussed outside of online spaces, too. In Mercado's "Popular Communication" class, students talked about the wider social impact of "Heated Rivalry." Athletes are finding the courage to publicly come out because of the series, with hockey player Jesse Kortuem even participating in an event with the Cutting Edges, Vancouver's first LGBTQ+ hockey team. As it's simultaneously represented in a television show, Kortuem's story gives hope to the younger generation of athletes.

"This is what the show was meant to do, and seeing that represented in the show was life-changing for many people," Mercado said.

There is still progress to be made outside of the series, but "Heated Rivalry" is giving fans hope.

"The show is taking the nation by storm," said Arath Seckin, a second-year behavioral neuroscience major at Northeastern. "It's gotten more people to be more positive toward the representation of such a couple."

Beyond visibility, Seckin appreciates the show's "raw take of gay love between the two leads" and values that their love gets a happy ending.

Speidel observes that many queer stories in the media often lead to tragedy or highlight the toxicity of relationships. "Heated Rivalry" distinguishes itself from this.

"It means so much to me, because it showcases what a healthy gay relationship looks like," Speidel said.

The season climaxes in a visit to Hollander's woodland cottage. Rozanov and Hollander face their feelings for one another after closeted hockey player Scott Hunter (François Arnaud) publicly kisses his partner, Kip Grady (Robbie Graham-Kuntz), on the ice. This gives Hollander and Rozanov the courage to finally honor their relationship during their getaway. The season concludes with an intimate coming out scene and Hollander's family embracing the couple.

"For Shane and Ilya to get to go to the cottage is huge," Speidel said.

"Heated Rivalry" has shifted the trajectory of the queer romance genre. It breaks convention in showing that LGBTQ+ stories do not have to end in tragedy or pain to touch viewers' hearts.

The series goes beyond a fictional romance, influencing fans to aspire for a more hopeful and accepting world and encouraging them to live authentically.

television

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