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They watched 'Heated Rivalry.' Then they were overcome with desire to hit the ice.

LGBTQ hockey leagues report a surge in aspiring new players following the hit show's success, at a moment of reckoning for the sport.

The Coachella Valley Pride Hockey team bench at this years Frozen Pride Classic tournament, in Winthrop, Wash. on Feb. 14. Meron Menghistab for NBC News

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By Jo Yurcaba

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After bingeing "Heated Rivalry," the wildly popular show about a steamy romance between two rival pro hockey players, Theo Tran, 18, wanted in on the action.

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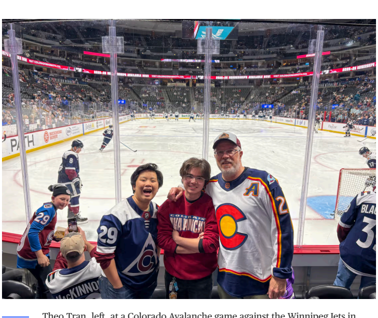
He bought his first pair of hockey skates on Tuesday and signed up for Chicago Pride Hockey, an LGBTQ league. He wasn't chasing Olympic glory, or even an Olympic love life, necessarily. He also wasn't alone.

Chicago Pride Hockey received nearly 100 requests for more information since the show began airing, said board member Zack Dessent. Nearly 40 of those were from people who wanted to learn how to skate and play hockey. As a result, Chicago Pride Hockey created a new-to-hockey program to pair up new players like Tran with more experienced members.



Theo Tran, left, at a Colorado Avalanche game against the Winnipeg Jets in Dec. 2025, is making the jump from fan to amateur player. Courtesy Theo Tran

Tran, who is a student in social studies education at DePaul University, said he initially thought the show wasn't for him, because the first episode was so focused on physical intimacy between the players. But his friends pressured him to watch it, in part because one of the main characters is Asian Canadian and Tran is Vietnamese.

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"My friends now are like, 'Can you imagine if I didn't peer-pressure you into watching that? Because this is just your whole life now,'" Tran said with a laugh, adding that the show was "genetically engineered" for him.

More than half a dozen of the country's largest LGBTQ hockey leagues, from Seattle to Chicago to New York City, said they've seen interest from both fans and prospective players spike over the last three months.

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The show came at a fraught cultural moment for the sport. Some National Hockey League teams have recently stopped hosting Pride nights. Those that still host them often get anti-LGBTQ comments and backlash to social media posts about the events, some fans say.

The Washington Capitals held a Pride Night Jan. 17. Some NHL teams have moved away from the practice. Scott Taetsch / Getty Images

The NHL – which told The Hollywood Reporter the show "might be the most unique driver for creating new fans" in its 108-year history – has also never had an active player who is publicly out as LGBTQ. (The closest was Luke Prokop, who signed a deal with the Nashville Predators in 2020 but hasn't played an NHL regular-season game.) And, just last month, amid the "Heated Rivalry" fanfare, USA Hockey, the sport's national governing body, prohibited trans players from participating in sex-segregated teams that align with their gender identity.

Some of the players in the country's largest queer leagues said they hope the show will help bring their decades-long fight to improve the sport they love into the public sphere.

"There's always work to be done," said Joey Gale, vice president and co-founder of the Seattle Pride Hockey Association, an LGBTQ league. "But because of all of this new momentum, it feels like we've gotten a new spark of energy."

Joey Gale, vice president of Seattle Pride Hockey Association, says the league has grown to more than 500 active players. Meron Menghistab for NBC News

Bringing the story of closeted hockey players into the mainstream

"Heated Rivalry," though it is known for its sex scenes, also contains emotional storylines that queer hockey players say have been healing, such when character Scott Hunter, a professional player, comes out on the ice after winning the championship.

François Arnaud as Scott Hunter and Robbie G.K. as Kip Grady in 'Heated Rivalry.' Sabrina Lantos / HBO

Gale said he started playing hockey at around age 3 while growing up in Minnesota, but he stopped at 13 due to the homophobic culture.

"I didn't feel like it was a place that I should be, a place that really was welcoming to someone like me," he said. Since he co-founded the Seattle Pride Hockey Association in 2019, the league has grown to more than 500 active players and hosts the largest pride hockey tournament in the world, he said.

Watching "Heated Rivalry," he thought about what it would have meant to him as a teenager not just to see the show, but to see the way it is being celebrated – with the leads appearing on late-night shows and carrying the Olympic torch in the lead-up to the Winter Games.

"The hockey community is generally a smaller one to begin with, and then the queer hockey community is a very small subset within that," said Gale. "We're a proud and loud and mighty group that's existed for a long time, but this show has really been able to bring us into the mainstream."

Since hockey has a higher barrier to entry than other sports, some leagues offer classes to those with limited experience on skates. Meron Menghistab for NBC News

Though interest in playing ice hockey has increased steadily over the last decade, the sport hasn't grown nearly as quickly as others, such as pickleball. This is partly due to the high costs and barriers to entry, such as the ability to skate. Leagues often require newer players to take classes and buy gear, for example.

Some leagues told NBC News they don't have the ability to train someone who has never skated – a skill that Connor Storrie, who plays Ilya Rozanov on the show, said was harder for him to learn than speaking Russian.

The show has not only given a boost to established teams, but has also prompted some LGBTQ people to try to form leagues of their own.

August Fawcett, 23, said he started playing hockey when he was 12 and went on to play for the North Carolina State women's team in college. But, due to NCAA rules, he stopped playing when he came out as transgender and began medically transitioning. After seeing "Heated Rivalry," he knew there would be more interest in a queer hockey team, so he posted a Google form on various social media platforms looking for players. Within the last month, nearly 30 people have expressed interest in joining.

August Fawcett played hockey on the NC State women's team in college until he transitioned. Courtesy August Fawcett

"I'm very excited," he said. "I miss playing hockey so much, especially now with the Olympics going on and being able to watch everybody playing. So hopefully this will be a really fun opportunity to just get more connections in the community and get back to doing something that I love, and hopefully make other people love it as much as I do."

'Our community is under continuous attack'

Though "Heated Rivalry" has undeniably generated interest in hockey, boosted ticket sales and brought new fans to the sport, some members of LGBTQ hockey leagues have a love-hate relationship with the series because it obscures the true stories of LGBTQ players who have been working to improve the sport's culture.

Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in 'Heated Rivalry.' Sabrina Lantos / HBO Max

Bob Tranchida, the 64-year-old co-founder of Coachella Valley Pride Hockey, said he has been playing hockey since he could walk and even played semiprofessional football. Throughout his life, he has refused to hide who he is.

Bob Tranchida, right, and Paul O. Kane, left, husbands who met at a gay hockey event in 1998 and have been together ever since. They are the co-founders of Coachella Valley Pride Hockey. Courtesy Paul O'Kane.

"That has caused some really horrible situations. I've had yelling and screaming matches with people who don't like the fact that there's a gay hockey player in the locker room," he said. "That's incredibly stressful. It takes so much effort to be yourself."

He's been involved in LGBTQ hockey organizations since 1998, when he co-founded the San Francisco Earthquakes, a queer hockey club. That same year, he attended the Toronto Friendship Tournament, a long-running LGBTQ hockey tournament, and met his husband, Paul O'Kane. The couple moved to Palm Springs in 2019 and founded Coachella Valley Pride Hockey in 2022. In just a few years, the organization has grown to more than 50 players on three teams and an annual international tournament.

Despite how much the community has grown, "it's a continuous fight," he said, citing the Trump administration's policies targeting the LGBTQ community and USA Hockey's new policy regarding trans players. Many ice rinks – including the rink where Coachella Valley Pride hosts its annual tournament – require players to have a USA Hockey membership for insurance purposes. That has created a difficult situation for Coachella Valley Pride, Tranchida said, which refuses to require tournament players to have a USA Hockey membership in part due to the policy. They are working with the rink to come up with solutions, including purchasing a different type of insurance, he said.

Players on LGBTQ hockey teams they hope the attention the show has brought to the sport can bring greater inclusivity. Meron Menghistab for NBC News

USA Hockey did not respond to a request for comment.

In addition to the policy, Tranchida said, there is cultural backlash. Take a look at any given post about a Pride night by the Anaheim Ducks, for example, and it is often littered with negative comments, he said.

"Our community is under continuous attack," Tranchida said. That's why he has a difficult relationship with "Heated Rivalry." He appreciates the visibility it has provided for the stories of queer hockey players. However, he said, "the real work, the real important things that are happening are the things that have been going on for decades with these associations."

Tranchida said the way forward is for LGBTQ players and allies to form relationships with the owners of NHL teams, for example, and other stakeholders with decision-making power.

Team Hustle plays team Rain City Rush at the Frozen Pride Classic tournament in Winthrop, Wash. on Feb. 14. Meron Menghistab for NBC News.

"The current environment and administration makes it so difficult to get into those doorways, to get into open doors, and it's gone backwards in a lot of ways," he said. "That's one of the important things about having organizations like ours, is that you get kicked in the teeth, you go two steps back, but you don't give up. You keep pushing forward."

As for Tran, he said he would like to see the NHL acknowledge queer fans directly. He noted that the league's 2023 ban on Pride jerseys is still in place and it doesn't acknowledge teams' Pride nights on social media. The NHL did not respond to a request for comment.

He said he's excited to take up the sport he loves with a rapidly growing group of fans.

"I get to go play something that gets me outside, but also gets me with people like myself," he said.

Sunset match between The Seattle Ironmen and the Sirens for the Frozen Pride Classic, at the Winthrop Rink in Wash. Meron Menghistab for NBC News

Jo Yurcaba
Jo Yurcaba is a reporter for NBC Out.

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