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## Heated Rivalry Is About More Than Just Sex

James Foster, Editor-in-Chief • February 20, 2026



Photo courtesy of IMDb

Shane and Ilya's relationship evolves over the course of eight years.

When *Heated Rivalry* first came across my feed and into conversations with friends, I instinctively rolled my eyes. It wasn't that I was disinterested in the idea of it; on the contrary, a show about closeted professional athletes sounded like an important story to grace mainstream media. However, far too often, gay stories in pop culture depict two individuals in remarkably specific, and oftentimes unrealistic, situations that make it challenging for viewers to identify with the characters on a level that goes beyond sexuality.

It's accurate to say that a relationship between the top two prospects in a men's professional sport is unrealistic. However, Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) and Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), the top two prospects in question, represent far more than just two closeted characters at the top of their sport. In the male sports world, anything that is perceived as not outwardly masculine is seen as a cause for degradation. From an early age, young athletes are taught by coaches, peers, and parents that in order to be the best, one must be the strongest, the toughest, the fastest — all adjectives that are not typically used to describe gay men.

Storrie, Williams, François Arnaud, and Robbie G.K. defy the stereotypes that gay men are not physically and emotionally strong and tough. The four leading actors have clearly dedicated years to working out and getting their bodies in incredible shape. Unfortunately, their good looks have been receiving as much, if not more, attention than the show's cultural significance.

The hyper-focus on the show's sex scenes and the infatuation with Storrie and Williams' bodies — especially from straight women — has catapulted the show into every corner of pop culture. It's understandable: Storrie and Williams are objectively very attractive, and sex is a major plot point in *Heated Rivalry*, for good reason. For both of the show's couples — Ilya and Shane as well as Scott Hunter and Kip Grady — the up-and-down roller coaster of their sex lives mirrors the emotional attraction each character feels to his partner. Scott and Kip quickly go from acquaintances at a smoothie bar to living with each other in the span of a few weeks. Their sex lives imitate the immediate connection the couple forges, going from a sexy one-night stand to emotional intimacy. Ilya and Shane, on the other hand, are in an eight-year-long relationship where they text some of the time and usually meet up for sex when they're in the same place. In the early years, the two meet, have sex, and go their separate ways, without much room for conversation or relationship building. As they mature, however, so does their relationship and their sex lives. For Ilya and Shane, the sex becomes deeply emotional, a full 180 from how their relationship began.

That being said, *Heated Rivalry* is about so much more than just hot men having sex.

As a gay athlete, *Heated Rivalry* was the first show where I saw so many parts of myself represented on screen. I'm fortunate that the relationship Kip and Shane have with their parents most closely mirrors my own. Like Kip, I'm incredibly close with my parents, who have supported me since the minute I came out to them. I knew exactly how Kip felt coming home and melting into his dad's hug. Watching Shane's coming out scene with his mom felt like I was watching my own memory — from my and Shane's tears and saying, "I just can't help it, I'm sorry," to my mom and Shane's mom's nearly identical response: "You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm sorry that I made you feel like you couldn't tell me."

Gay characters' stories in the media typically end in tragedy. Arguably the most famous fictional gay relationship in 2000s media, between *Brokeback Mountain's* Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, is defined by sadness, loss, and death. In *Call Me By Your Name*, another wildly popular gay movie, 17-year-old Elio falls in love with 24-year-old Oliver, who debatably grooms him during the summer they are together before leaving and marrying a woman. While I did have strong emotional reactions to both of these films, neither one of them came close to making me feel how I did watching *Heated Rivalry*. Seeing gay characters work through their own personal struggles and find joy on the other side took me on a rollercoaster of emotions that no other show or movie has provided.

While themes of loss and death affect both of the relationships in *Heated Rivalry*, they are not defined by them. Instead, both couples embark on journeys of perseverance, personal growth, and eventual happiness. This show's impact on the gay community deserves its recognition to go beyond the fixation on its depictions of sex. Thanks to *Heated Rivalry*, so many young gay men have a love story with a happy ending that they can relate to in modern media.

Connor Storrie

Heated Rivalry

Hudson Williams

James Foster

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