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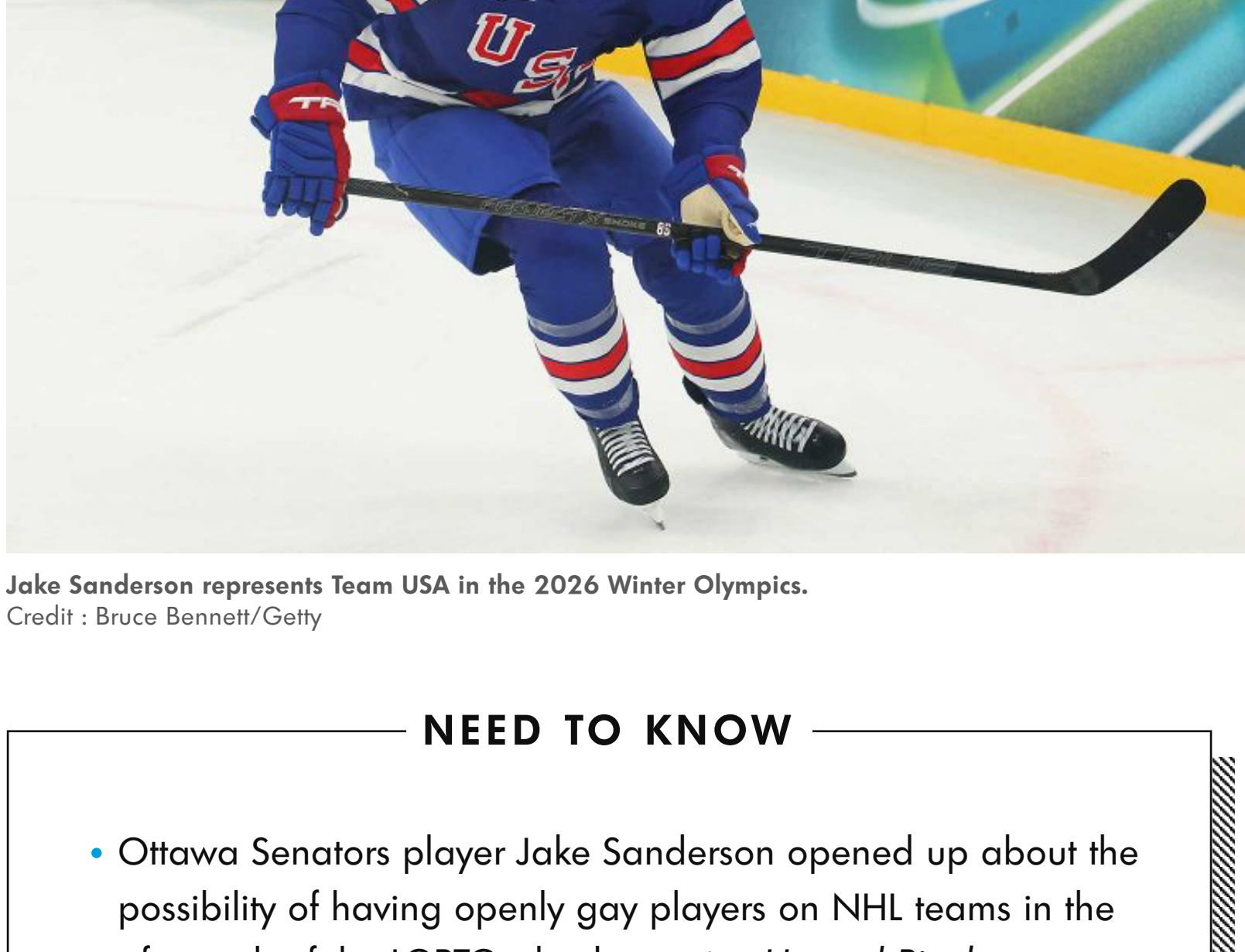
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NHL Star Jake Sanderson Believes Players Would Be Accepting of Openly Gay Teammates: ‘We Love Them No Matter What’

Sanderson said he hadn't yet watched 'Heated Rivalry,' but said the show could "instill some confidence" in people

By **Michael Nied** | Published on February 18, 2026 11:35AM EST

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Jake Sanderson represents Team USA in the 2026 Winter Olympics.
Credit : Bruce Bennett/Getty

NEED TO KNOW

- Ottawa Senators player Jake Sanderson opened up about the possibility of having openly gay players on NHL teams in the aftermath of the LGBTQ+ hockey series *Heated Rivalry*
- The 23-year-old, who is playing on Team USA at the 2026 Winter Olympics, believed that LGBTQ+ teammates would be welcomed with open arms in the league
- While he had not watched *Heated Rivalry*, Sanderson added that it was a show that could "instill some confidence in some people"

Jake Sanderson believes that the NHL is a home for players of all sexualities.

The 23-year-old defenseman for the Ottawa Senators, who is currently in Italy competing for [Team USA](#) in the [2026 Winter Olympics](#), was asked about the impact of the LGBTQ+ hockey show [Heated Rivalry](#) on the sporting community.

While he acknowledged that he hadn't watched the series — based on author Rachel Reid's *Game Changers* saga — he recognized the role it could play during an interview with [The Associated Press](#).

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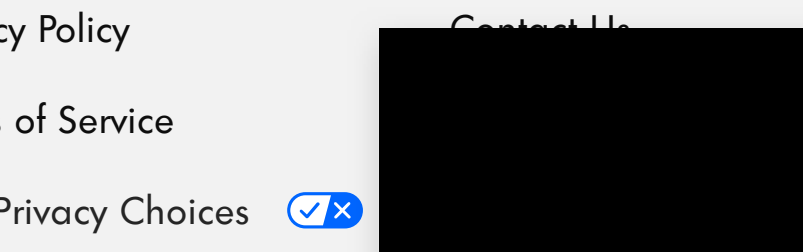
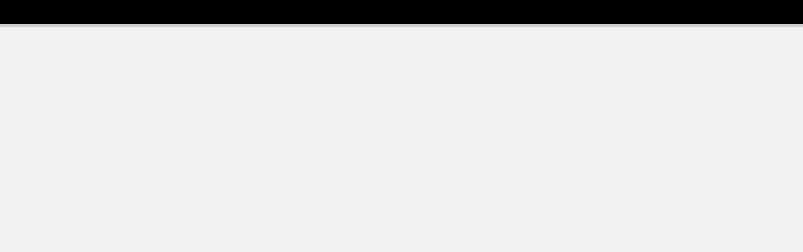
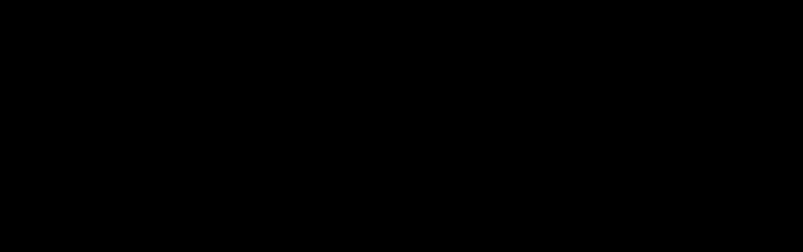
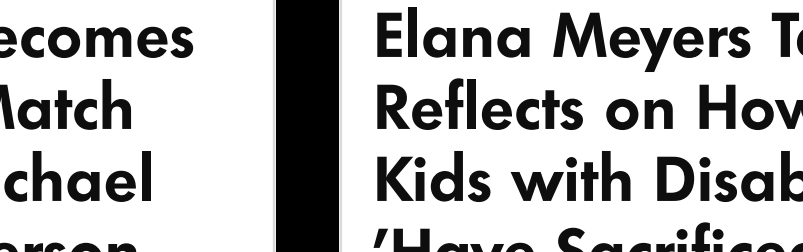
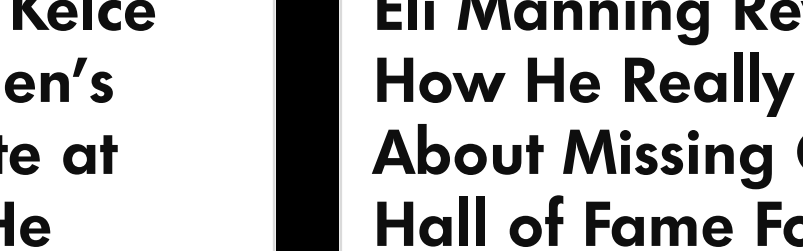
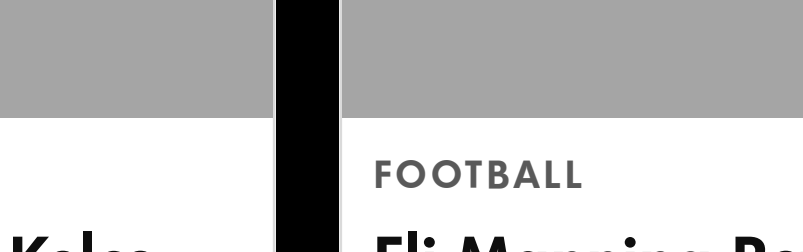
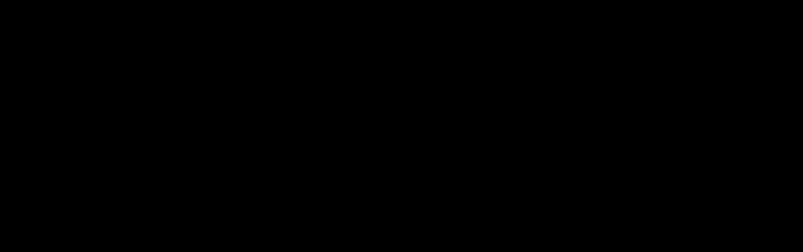
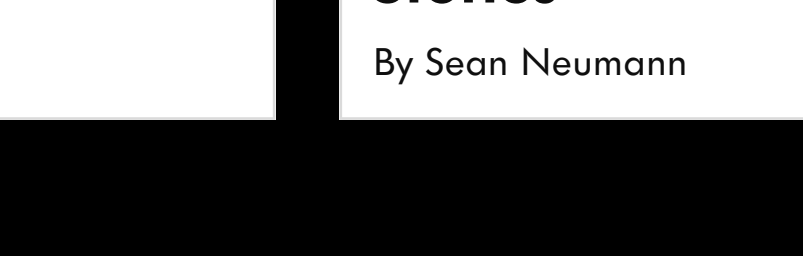
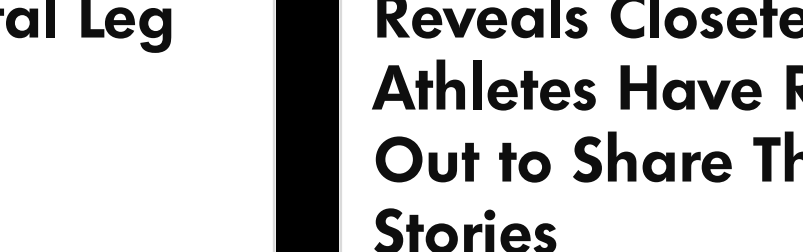
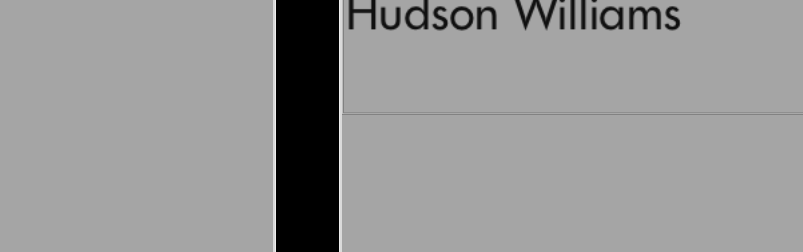
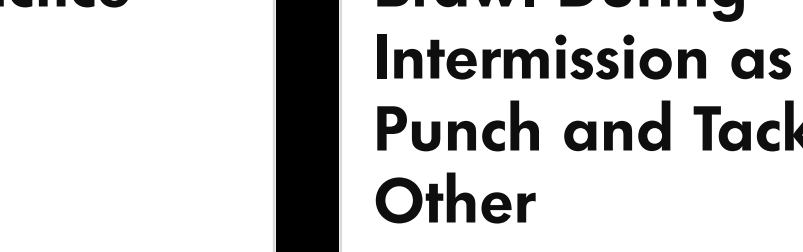
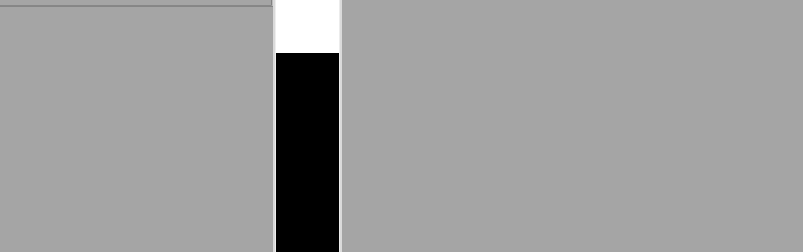
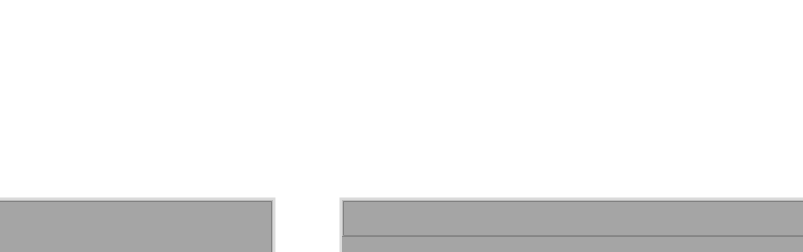
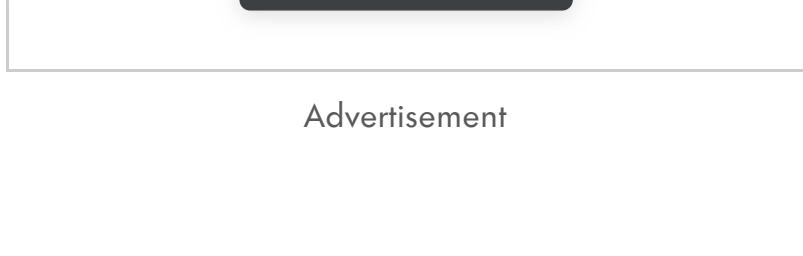
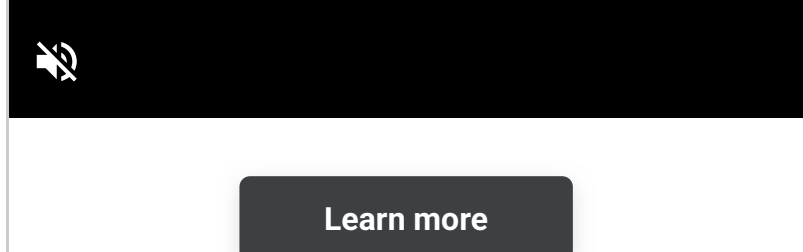
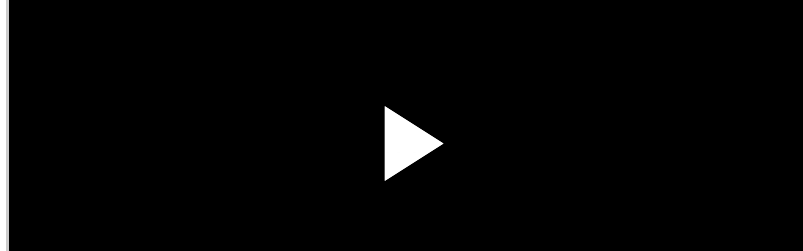
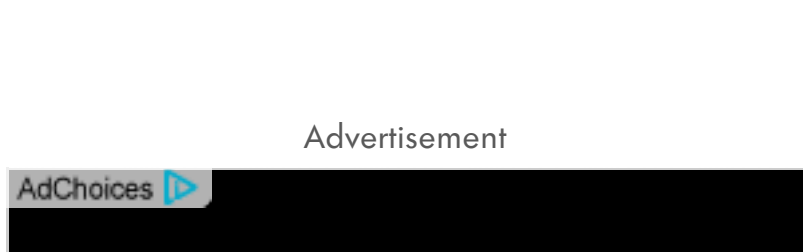
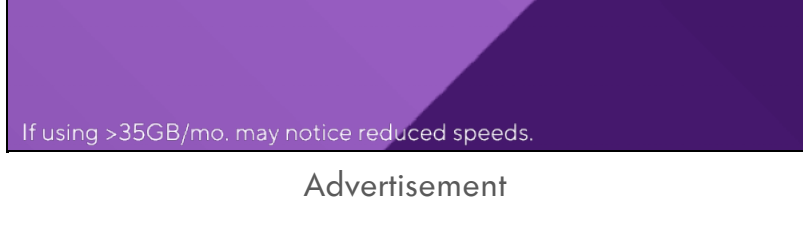
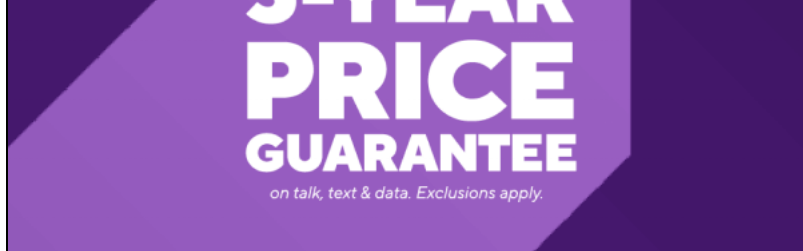
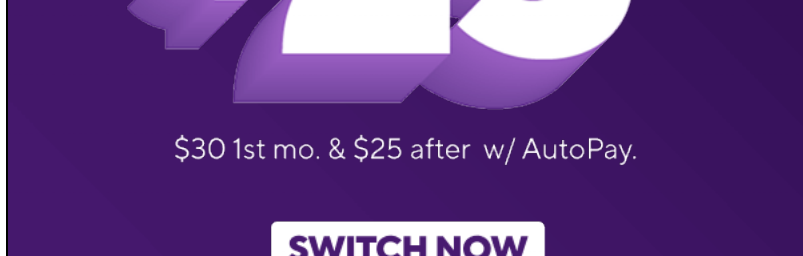
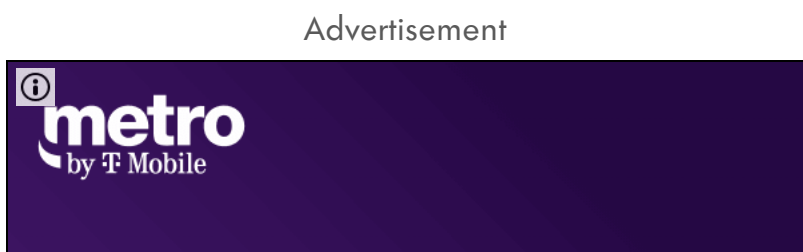
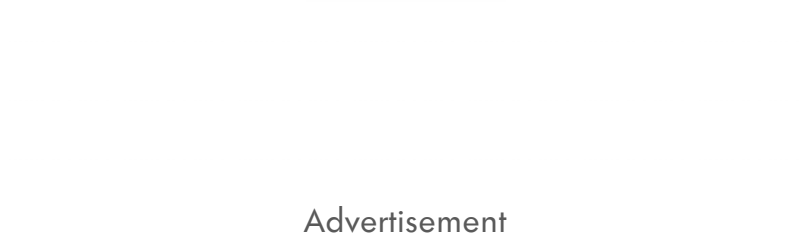
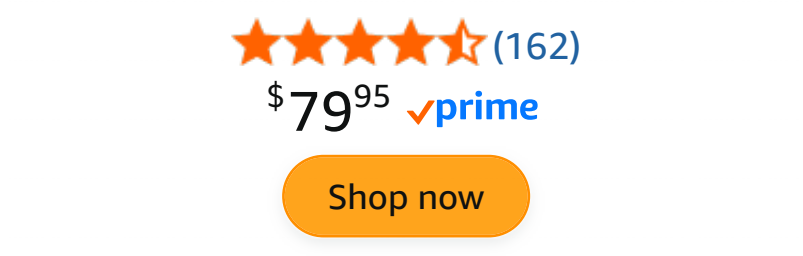
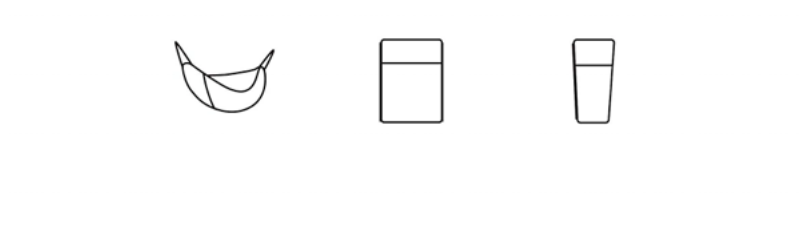


"You never know if that show [will] instill some confidence in some people," he said.

Sanderson added that he thought openly gay players would be welcomed with open arms by their teams in the NHL, saying, "I don't think we would treat them any differently. They're our teammates, we love them no matter what, and obviously embrace them, absolutely."



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During his conversation with the outlet, Sanderson referenced Luke Prokop.

Prokop, 23, came out as gay in July 2021, making him the [first out athlete with an NHL contract](#). However, he has not yet played an NHL game, despite having been under contract with the Nashville Predators.

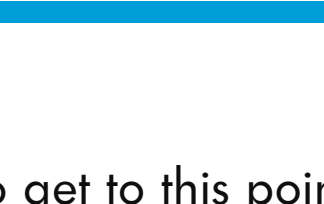
"While the past year and a half has been crazy, it has also given me the chance to find my true self. I am no longer scared to hide who I am," Prokop wrote in a statement shared on [Instagram](#) at the time. "Today I am proud to publicly tell everyone that I am gay."

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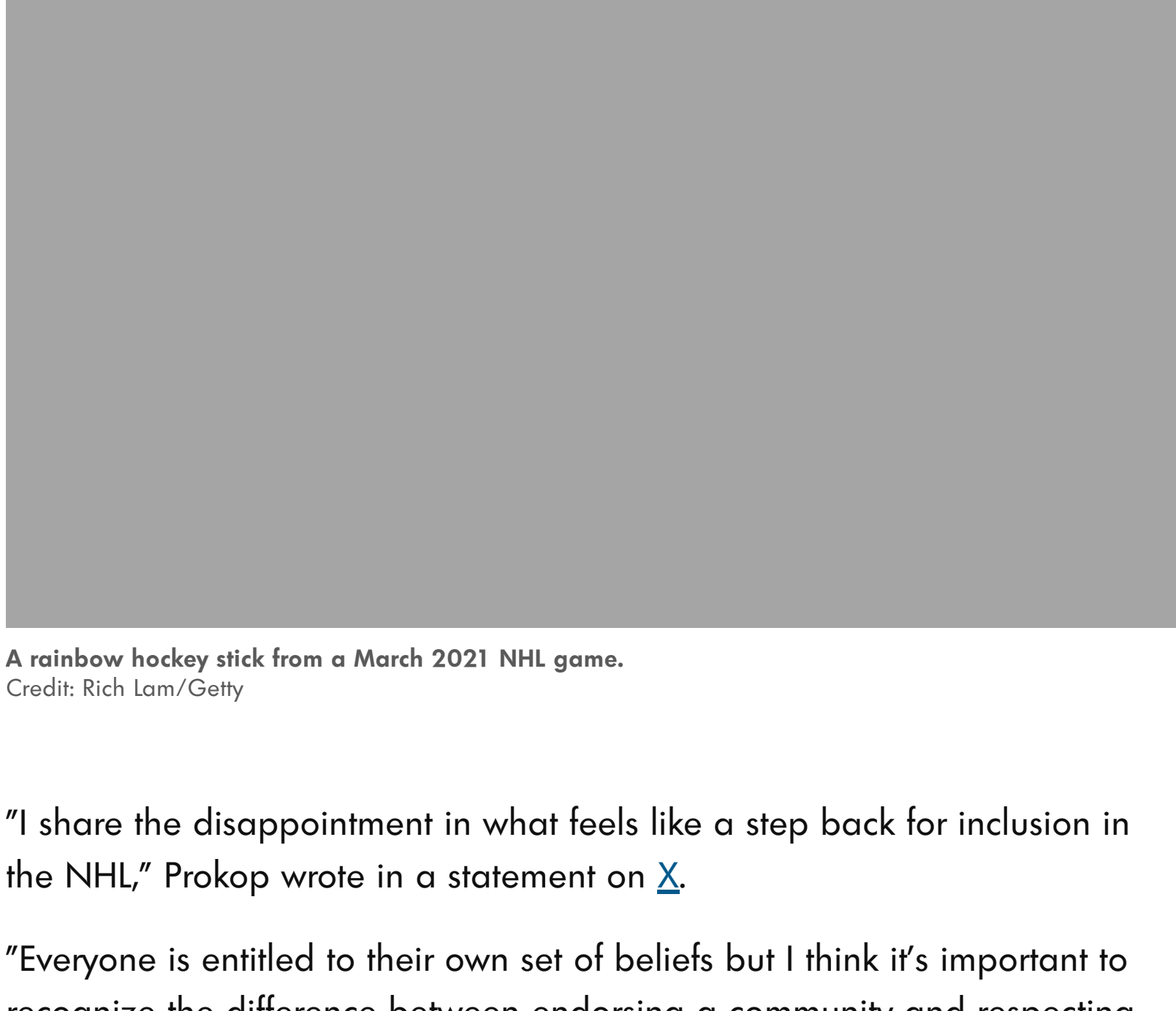


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Continuing, he added, "It has been quite the journey to get to this point in my life, but I could not be happier with my decision to come out. From a young age I have dreamed of being an NHL player, and I believe that living my authentic life will allow me to bring my whole self to the rink and improve my chances of fulfilling my dreams."

In 2023, Prokop called out a [lack of inclusion](#) within the NHL as players refused to wear Pride jerseys or participate in NHL Pride Nights.



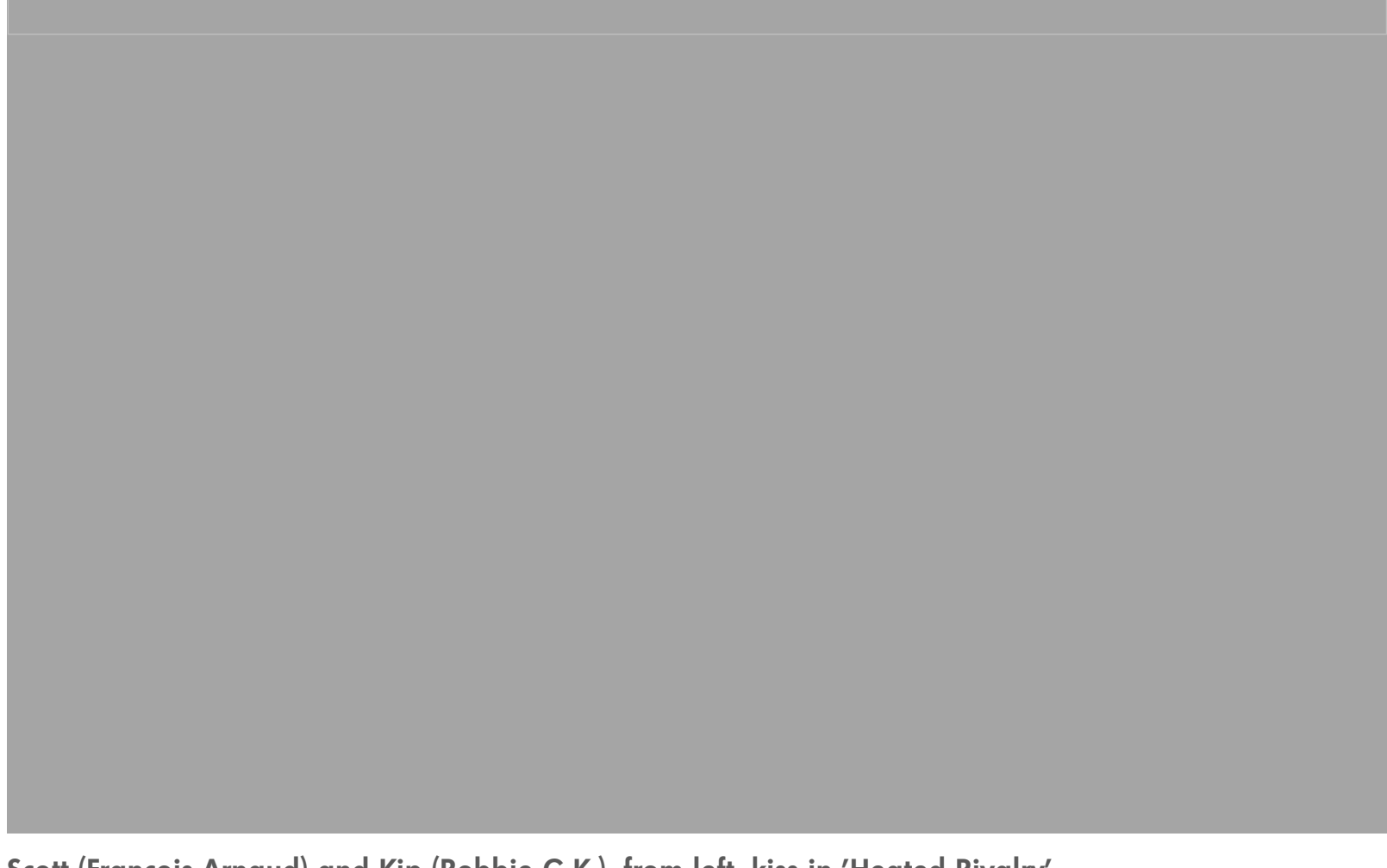
A rainbow hockey stick from a March 2021 NHL game.
Credit: Rich Lam/Getty

"I share the disappointment in what feels like a step back for inclusion in the NHL," Prokop wrote in a statement on [X](#).

"Everyone is entitled to their own set of beliefs but I think it's important to recognize the difference between endorsing a community and respecting individuals within it," he wrote, describing the inclusive events as "an essential step" the NHL had to take.

Sanderson wasn't the only member of Team USA's hockey team to speak with AP about *Heated Rivalry* at the Olympics.

Zach Werenski, the 28-year-old defenseman for the Columbus Blue Jackets, also hadn't seen the show yet. However, he said that he's heard "how great it is."



Scott (Francois Arnaud) and Kip (Robbie G.K.) from left, kiss in 'Heated Rivalry'.
Credit: Crave

"It's definitely good for the sport of hockey. Whenever you can add more eyes to the game and have people talk about the game and talk about inclusivity, I think it's just great for the sport," he said.

Heated Rivalry star Hudson Williams, 25, brings Shane Hollander to life in the hugely popular Crave series, which will [return for a second season](#) in the spring of 2027. Shane's secret romance with his perceived rival Ilya Rozanov ([Connor Storrle](#)) centered the show's first season.

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During a January 2025 appearance on Sirius XM's *Andy Cohen Live*, Williams revealed that [he'd heard from professional athletes who were still in the closet](#) after the show's premiere.

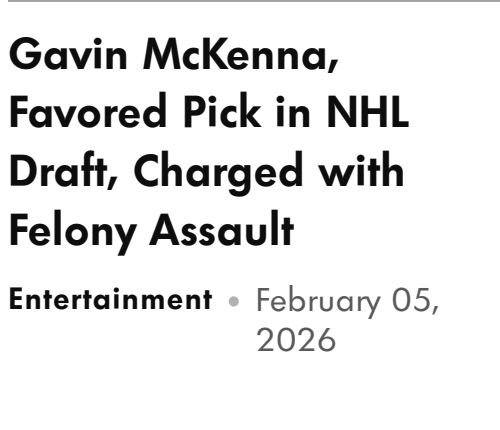
"Hockey players, football players, basketball players, yeah. So, then they're reaching out to Rachel, our author, who'll then kind of relay these lovely anonymous emails. And sometimes they're just reaching out privately through, like, Instagram," he said.

"And those ones are the ones that really just kind of hit you and go, 'Oh, so this is a fun show, and it's celebratory, but also sometimes it's just hitting people right in the nerve,'" he told Cohen.

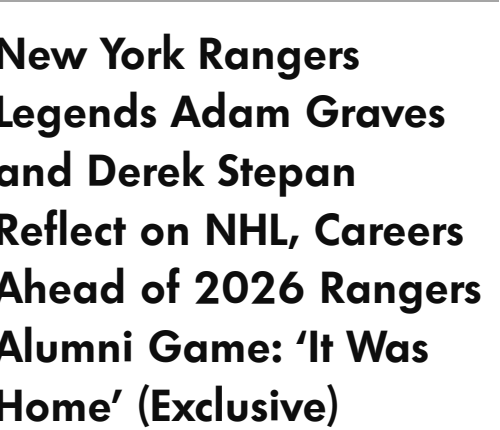
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