

Heated Relevance

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Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

November 28th, 2025, marks the beginning of what we now know as the cultural shift that is “Heated Rivalry.” Since premiering on HBO Max in the U.S., the show and, consequently, the six books in the series by Rachel Reid on which it is based, have skyrocketed in the zeitgeist. Instagram, TikTok, Threads, X (formerly Twitter) and any other social media site contain feeds that are entirely clips from the show, edits or information about the actors. At least that's what my feeds look like right now.

For those of us who have watched the show, this is not surprising. To put it simply, it is a good show, well filmed and written, with immensely talented actors. However, it is more than that. And that's what I'm here to talk about today. To all the haters, or to the people who shy away from steamy shows or sports romance, this is why “Heated Rivalry” is relevant and important, in my opinion at least.

To begin, the show reflects the realistic feelings many share about realizing their sexuality. Shane Hollander, played by Hudson Williams, does not define his sexuality, even with his sexual partner, Ilya, played by Connor Storrie, until the fifth episode. In the show, Ilya plays it off, acting as if it is not a shock since they, two men, have been intimate. Yet, for Shane, it means everything. It's coming to terms, a realization of his feelings and what comes with that in this society.

Although I am a straight woman and cannot speak directly about the experiences of queer people, based on what I know from friends and work in my gender studies classes, the realization that who you love may not be accepted is daunting and painful, as it could change everything you had set in stone (Yes, I know this is an obvious observation for many people, but still needed to be explicitly stated). I think it's important and affirming, yet a little heartbreaking, to see someone like Shane Hollander, a world-renowned athlete, top of his game, with sponsorships galore, feel the same. To know that no one is alone in that feeling, fortunately and unfortunately.

Additionally, I feel Rachel Reid's series “Game Changers” and Jacob Tierney's “Heated Rivalry” help normalize queer intimacy. Sex is a part of life and, consequently, love. We see it on TV and in movies frequently. However, we usually see sex between heteronormative couples, and it is celebrated, while the history of queer intimacy is tragic and stereotyped. Homosexuality was coded into the characters' mannerisms, creating blatant stereotypes regarding this community. Yet, shows and movies such as “Heated Rivalry” challenge that.

Shane and Ilya's story is difficult, as every relationship is, but it is not tragic. It is full of love and so is the intimacy. It shows that queer characters and relationships have depth and normalizes discussing them. Growing up, I watched many romance movies, and watching the girl finally get the guy, a sweet kiss placed on her lips in the dark, made me long for the day I would fall in love and do the same. “Heated Rivalry” offers queer kids the same experience.

Representation matters. Good representation, where characters and relations are well thought out and well-rounded. “Heated Rivalry” is that. Many queer athletes have felt inspired and affirmed by the series, deciding to come out, including Jesse Kortuem and AJ Ogilvy. Williams also shared in a few interviews that many closeted athletes have reached out to him, expressing their love for heated rivalries and how they helped them.

As I get off my soapbox, this is all to say that this is more than a show or a trend. It's a statement that queer love is love and deserves the same respect and treatment in the media as hetero love. That everyone deserves to love and be loved, however they want. And it just happens to be a pretty good story, too.

Strike Out,

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