

Heated Rivalry is queering hockey one episode at a time

The ice hockey drama's meteoric rise marks a shift in how sports is portrayed

🕒 February 7, 2026 Navnoor Singh



The Crave show is an adaptation of Canadian author Rachel Reid's *Game Changers* book series. (Bell Media)

There isn't anything more Canadian than hockey — except if you count maple syrup and being passive aggressive.

Even then, seeing both 2SLBTQIA+ themes and hockey in mainstream media is not as common as one would hope in a supposedly progressive country.

However, this changed with Crave's recent hit series *Heated Rivalry*, which has taken the world of ice hockey and beyond by storm. Directed by Jacob Tierney, who is [gay](#), the series is based on a book by Nova Scotia-based author Rachel Reid and part of her hockey-themed gay romance series *Game Changers*.

The show has generated a lot of buzz on social and mainstream media alike, notably because of its thoughtful treatment of queer intimacy — a rarity on mainstream TV.

Both queer and non-queer viewers praise the show's acting and its authentic portrayal of queer experiences in sports, especially where the culture itself is heteronormative and any semblance of digression could lead to consequences.

In an increasingly reactionary world, a queer romance gaining widespread popularity is a breath of fresh air.

The show revolves around two closeted hockey players: Canadian Shane Hollander, played by Hudson Williams, and Russian Ilya Rozanov, played by Connor Storrie. They switch between being rivals on ice to secret lovers, and the show explores their relationship, and the impact of the sport and their queerness on their lives.

Several queer hockey players, including those who left the sport due to its culture, felt represented through the show and [shared](#) their stories, including one who [came out](#) publicly after watching the series. Even the show's accessories and costumes, such as the fleece jacket Shane wore during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, are exploding in popularity — so much so that some [now want it](#) as the official Team Canada merch.

I think the series does a great job of highlighting queer experiences in an area where they don't receive much attention. It has touched the lives of people who have experienced homophobia and queerphobia due to the general nature of slurs and locker room conversations.

The show has also opened up hockey to new audiences, especially young and queer people, who feel more interested in the sport due to the conversation around inclusivity.

There is still a long way to go, though, as the NHL banned Pride tape on hockey sticks in October 2023, which it later [reversed](#), in part due to one player, Travis Dermott, defying the ban and creating a conversation around it.

Without giving out too many spoilers, I want to address the mixed reactions to Episode 3 of the six-episode show, in which two supporting characters take centre stage instead of the main protagonists.

One of them is Scott Hunter, played by François Arnaud, who is bisexual, a closeted American player and the other is his boyfriend Kip Grady — played by Robbie G.K. Some fans disapproved of the shift of focus away from Shane and Ilya, but I think this episode was essential to Shane and Ilya's relationship, as well the progression of the show.

The culmination of Scott and Kip's love story in Episode 5 empowers Ilya to become more emotionally invested in his own relationship. Prior to, he appeared standoff-ish and shied away from emotional vulnerability, which is later explained through his personal circumstances.

Up until Episode 4, Ilya seemed unwilling to be emotionally vulnerable, preferring to focus more on physical intimacy, while Shane clearly wanted more. Although, both were equally scared of their "secret" getting out.

Shane and Ilya's relationship is portrayed in a progressive and nuanced way. Each of them deal with feelings of jealousy, internalized homophobia, and family circumstances in their own way and come out — pun intended — stronger together.

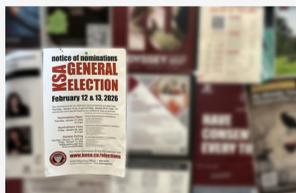
I think Season 2 will deal with them being more public about their relationship, or being "found out" — we'll see, and how it affects their careers and the people around them.

The series is definitely a trailblazer as far as queer sports media goes. I can only imagine how many queer hockey players the show has empowered to live, love, and play as they want.

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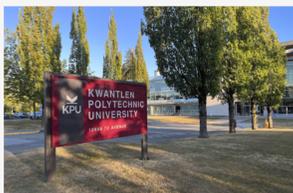
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