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What makes 'Heated Rivalry' so hot and cold?

'Heated Rivalry' uses sports to create positive representation for LGBTQ+ people

Jet Bautista, Multimedia Reporter
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sabrina lantos

Photograph by Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max Courtesy of Warner Bros Discovery.

Usually, I'm not a fan of romantic TV shows or dramas, but the dramatic irony in "Heated Rivalry" caught me off guard. A young sports rivalry between two hockey players is nothing out of the ordinary, but the romance element of the story makes it unique. The show starts slowly, and you feel an immediate connection between the characters while watching. Based on the romance novel by Rachel Reid, the series follows athletes Shane Hollander and Ilaya Rozanov, intensely showing the audience their relationships as they balance hockey and life.

They fall in love during a commercial shoot, hook up, and have a secret romance away from the spotlight of hockey. After their rivalry is made public, the media's spotlight intensifies, along with their fear of coming out. Because of this, there is constant pressure from their families and trash talk from their teammates about one-upping each other. Not to mention the fact that their rivalry stems from masculine ideals in a worldwide physical sport, and coming out as gay would be the defining moment of their careers.

It's easy to fall in love with the chemistry between Shane and Ilaya. On camera, both men have completely different personas. Shane, played by Hudson Williams, is kind, friendly, engaging, and outgoing, while Conner Storrie, as Rozanov, is serious, stern, and tough. What makes their chemistry entertaining is that when they're around each other, they're complete. It takes time, but in each episode, the pair opens up more and more until they are literally in each other's arms and admit their love. There's a certain stigma around men showing their emotions. Emotions don't make you weak; emotions make you human, or else you wouldn't have them. It's important to have empathy and compassion, and that is amplified in the show since the characters Shane and Rozanov are who they are, even to each other at first.

They hide their stress and frustration from the public, friends, and family by secretly hooking up in hotels while traveling on the road, and referring to each other as women while texting and sexting. The show jumps ahead in time from them getting drafted, their rookie years, and later in their careers. The show demonstrates the time it took for them to realize that they are madly in love with each other, and should just admit their feelings instead of constantly hooking up to cope with the pressure and expectations they feel from family and as professional athletes. Throughout each episode, you see how desperately Shane and Ilaya want to be around each other and distance themselves from hockey. But they keep finding ways to run from the fact of their hidden sexuality through dating women or blatantly ignoring each other's feelings and each other in public.

Heated Rivalry isn't just sports and romance; it's a story of fear, accompanied with the courage and strength to be your authentic self. Anyone who has to hide their sexuality can relate to the dynamic on the screen. Scenes in the show will bring up relatable emotions for people who have or don't want to have a conversation with their friends or family about their LGBTQ identity. The show is for both gay and non gay audiences. For non gay audiences, it shows what it's like to be a man and feel pressure of being gay and trying to hide it from everyone, and showing everyone explicitly, just because they're men, there is romance and intimate connections. For gay audiences, the show means a lot to people around the world who are a part of the LGBTQ community. The show manages to demonstrate representation of the LGBTQ community, allowing for more visibility on screen for viewers across the world.

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