



Keith Dwiggins

OPINION

Hockey's Real Heated Rivalry Isn't Fiction

The real rivalry in hockey is between exclusion and progress, and the Portland United Hockey League is choosing progress.

HAYDEN NEUMANN · FEBRUARY 15, 2026 · 0 COMMENTS

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Written by [Hayden Neumann](#)



With the release and sudden popularity of the television show “Heated Rivalry,” there has been an undeniable culture shift surrounding the world of ice hockey. Originally a book series written by Rachel Reid, the story revolves around two hockey rivals who fall in love, and was adapted as a show on Crave and HBO in Nov. 2025. It took the world by storm.

“It was hot and heartbreaking in all the best ways,” Emily Engelbrecht, vice president of the Portland United Hockey League (PUHL), said. “A lot of queer media begins or ends in tragedy, and to see something in such a positive light—I think that is one of the best representations we can have.”

Engelbrecht didn't start playing hockey until 2022, just a few months after the PUHL was formed. Growing up in Michigan, she played a variety of sports including rugby and tennis, but never formally learned how to ice skate. The first time she put on ice skates in over 12 years was at the “Women Give Hockey A Try Day” the PUHL hosted in the summer of 2022. The league has continued to host these Give Hockey a Try clinics annually.

“One of my co-workers came up to me and said, ‘Hey, you’re from Michigan. You know hockey, right? Do you want to go try this?’ And I was like, ‘You know what? Yeah.’ I had made a mission when I moved here: I wanted to find my community, I wanted to find my people. And I fell in love with hockey instantly,” said Engelbrecht.

The PUHL has created a beautiful community of women, transgender and gender expansive people—and most of us are queer. If you told me two years ago I'd be playing hockey as a goalie, I'd laugh in your face and say, “I wish.” If you told me five years ago, I'd look at you like you were insane.

I grew up hating sports. I thought they were stupid, and they didn't make sense. Even though I lived in Texas, where football is bigger than the state itself, I never understood the appeal. I was a queer kid, drawn to the arts— theatre, choir, writing and reading. Sports were for the jocks and popular kids, not the little gay kids like me.

I wish I figured out how wrong I was sooner, but it took me until I was 17 years old to even start engaging in the world of sports, specifically hockey. Even then, the idea of playing wasn't even an option for me, not until I started seeing other queer people in the world of hockey.

In 2021, Luke Prokop became the first player under a National Hockey League (NHL) contract to come out as gay. This was monumental, not only for the world of hockey, but also for me. A queer person? Playing hockey?

We can do that?

That summer, I bought my first piece of equipment.

A year later, I still didn't have all the gear, nor did I have any idea how to actually start. I messaged Brock McGillis, one of the first professional hockey players to come out as gay, on Instagram. We had been mutuals for a little while at that point, having talked a handful of times before.

“I really want to start playing hockey,” I wrote. “But I'm scared of how I'd be treated as a trans guy on a team. Do you say I go for it or just stick to being a fan of the sport?”

“Is there a queer league or group nearby?” he sent back.

That sent me down a rabbit hole of research. The short answer was no, there was not. The long answer was that there was a league, the Portland Women's Hockey League, that was actively being formed. It wasn't specifically a queer league, but their Instagram bio said they were “creating a space where women and/or trans, nonbinary, and gender expansive individuals have unlimited opportunities to learn and play ice hockey.”

At the time, I identified as a trans male and didn't feel comfortable playing for a women's team, even if they said they were inclusive. In April 2024, however, they made an announcement: they were changing their name to the Portland United Hockey League.

When I had originally discovered the PUHL, I was living outside of Portland in Hillsboro. I moved to Washington in the summer of 2022, but was planning on moving back to Oregon in the summer of 2024. The name change in April solidified it for me. I knew I was going to play. No matter how expensive (it took me a total of three years to get all the gear), no matter how hard it was or how daunting it was, I was going to learn how to play hockey. In Aug. 2024, at 21 years old, I stepped onto the ice in full gear for the first time.

It shouldn't have taken me that long. There are players in our league who hadn't started playing until their forties, fifties or even older, and I look up to them. It's never too late to start, but the fact that a lot of us haven't had the option until recently is a sign that something needs to change.

Hockey is stereotypically a straight men's sport, where homophobia thrives in the locker room and in the stands. The culture encourages homogeneity and frowns on those considered ‘other’, but groups like my league are working to change that.

“It's a threat to their masculinity,” said Carrie Blowers, another player in our league. “I feel like we're in the late stages of, like—it's going to get worse before it gets better.”

USA Hockey, the governing body of ice hockey in the United States, has introduced a policy practically barring transgender athletes from playing, unless they play in co-ed leagues. Set to begin April 1, 2026, this policy was quietly rolled out in Nov. 2025, and leagues are only just now finding out about it.

Under the [new policy](#), participation in sex-restricted leagues is now solely based on biological sex, with an additional rule that “a female (as assigned at birth) may not play in programs restricted to females if they have undergone any male hormone therapy.” This essentially forbids transgender men from playing in any league, unless they play in co-ed or open hockey.

USA Hockey's new policy was unfortunately not surprising to Kennedy Nields, Blowers' wife and my team captain.

Nields said her experience as a queer person in sports is probably different from most, since she didn't come out until she was 32. This doesn't mean she wasn't alienated in hockey, however. She grew up playing on boys' hockey teams, a lot of times the only girl on the team.

“It's a hyper masculine sport,” said Nields. “Having played with my brothers and boys' teams all my life, I've seen how it's very homophobic. Of course I wasn't out then, but I'm not surprised that you have this masculine sport organization coming in and making rules about things they don't know all that much about.”

The dichotomy between “Heated Rivalry” being such a worldwide phenomenon right now, and queer people continuing to face adversity and discrimination in the sport they play is both interesting and upsetting. There's a lot of “talking the talk” but not necessarily “walking the walk.” I am one of the few lucky athletes who can say my league is doing both.

“We're trying to figure everything out,” said Engelbrecht. “We can't control what the rink is going to do, but we can control how we approach the little things within our own league. We're going to continue to work to ensure it continues to be a safe space for everyone.”



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