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How 'Heated Rivalry' is sparking new conversations about queer visibility on the ice in DC

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'Heated Rivalry,' the hit hockey-romance book turned streaming phenomenon, has taken the internet by storm. Inside real locker rooms, the series is prompting a deeper conversation about hockey culture and who gets to feel at home in the sport.

Hockey has long been known as a stereotypically macho and physical sport. But on Sunday nights at the Gardens Ice House in Laurel, Maryland, players lace up their skates not just for the love of hockey, but for the sense of belonging that comes with it.

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Justin del Rosario, founder and organizer for Gay Hockey DC, only started playing hockey in 2018 as a way to cross something off his bucket list. He then fell in love with the sport and decided to create a space where other queer people in the D.C. area could feel accepted on and off the ice.



'We've formed a small family of players, and we all do share our traumas or negative experiences. But the bottom line is they love the sport. They love hockey. They breathe it,' del Rosario told WTOP.

The Crave Canada show is centered on the secret romance between two rival professional hockey players, Canada's Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Russia's Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), and del Rosario and other members of Gay Hockey DC. have been able to relate in more ways than one.

'There's an opinion that's formed around 'Heated Rivalry,' especially from those who have grown up in the sport and their experience of homophobia and ... a touch of hockey culture,' he said.

He said there's been a growth in interest in the volunteer-led hockey league since the show came out in late December, with an influx of prospective players — some who don't even have any experience in a rink.

'Since 'Heated Rivalry' came out — the homophobia is still there — but the interest in the sport of hockey has surged since then,' del Rosario said.

In 2023, the National Hockey League banned political messaging on uniforms, including rainbow tape some players would wrap on their sticks to show allyship. The ban drew immediate backlash from players and the league reversed the decision just a few months later.

'The NHL has recognized the interest in hockey because of this television series, but it doesn't take the NHL off the hook with the type of withdrawn support for diversity,' del Rosario said.

While a handful of professional players outside the NHL have come out of the closet in recent years, del Rosario said the league itself has yet to see an openly gay active player — something he hopes will change.

'I hope that the NHL will continue to build the momentum of mutual respect, especially with its players. And hopefully in the future, not too distant future, where a hockey player can feel confident to come out,' he said.

Gay Hockey DC. partners with Monumental Sports & Entertainment and helps organize Pride Nights at Capital One Arena. Del Rosario said the organization receives strong support from the staff within the Capitals group.

'It also creates a camaraderie that only exists on the ice, regardless of sexual orientation and race and age, especially whatever physical differences that we have — the love of hockey and being on the ice to play the sport,' he said.

Del Rosario said the culture around hockey is evolving, and he hopes the growth in interest from 'Heated Rivalry' will draw new attention from people curious about hockey but are unsure about where they could comfortably fit.

'I've met a lot of really great people, men and women and trans folks, who have a story to tell, and because of their love of hockey, it's expressed on the ice, especially with their skill level and how much they love their sport. You can see it on the ice,' he said.

WTOP's Abby Stuckrath contributed to this report.

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Ciara Wells is the Evening Digital Editor at WTOP. She is a graduate of American University where she studied journalism and Spanish. Before joining WTOP, she was the opinion team editor at a student publication and a content specialist at an HBCU in Detroit.



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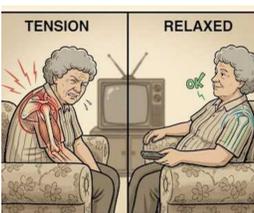
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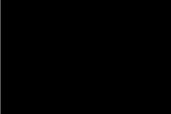
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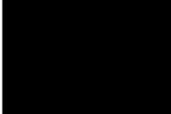
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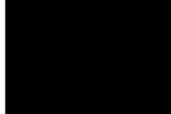
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