

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie for Heated Rivalry promotional shoot | Photo: HBO

Opinion: The Impact of “Heated Rivalry” on Queer Representation

by Bianca Mercado March 2, 2026 6 mins read

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“Heated Rivalry,” the popular Canadian television show that released on November 28th, 2025, presents a queer love story between two professional hockey players over the course of a decade-long rivalry. Fans across many countries have fallen in love with the main characters, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.

The tremendous online response to the show has made it a phenomenon. In addition to expressing their admiration for the characters, people are discussing how this story has changed queer representation in mainstream media and its impact on queer athletes. The show’s lack of stereotypes allows for self exploration as well as a depiction of what healthy relationships can look like.

In [Ian Kerner's article on CNN](#), psychotherapist Lily Hetzler, calls attention to Shane and Ilya’s relationship a reflection of “sexual aliveness, exploring the full spectrums of both our sexuality and our orientation, and letting go of our grip on the narrative of what relationship should be.”

Representations of LGBTQ+ sexuality often foreground feelings of shame due to rampant discrimination. Ilya and Shane show a different side of this. Both characters create a safe space for each other to be themselves and discover what their relationship could mean for both of them. They do not alienate or humiliate each other and are mindful of one another. This reassurance adds to the safety of their relationship and the characters' wellbeing.

The male characters embody both emotional fluidity and affection for one another. For example, during Shane and Ilya’s intimate moments, Ilya checks in with Shane, asking “is okay?” He asks and waits for consent.

The characters are extremely vulnerable and yet, in the series’ final episodes, are able to share more of what is going on in their personal lives, which they have not done before in almost a decade of them meeting up. Their acts of affection are small but impactful. Ilya makes Shane tuna melt; they caress each other’s thumbs on the beach; they are constantly thinking of one another and making small gestures that help each other feel safe and secure.

The show’s depiction of queer intimacy may also change a viewer’s perspective on topics addressed or depicted. In a [CBC article by Abby Hughes](#), makes the point that intimate scenes are usually portrayed using “a lot of suggestion, perhaps fading to black,” which can reinforce the shaming of queer intimacy by hiding it from the public eye. Hughes suggests that in “Heated Rivalry,” there are “no cutaways for the duration of the act.” The audience gets to fully experience the intimacy shared by both characters up close, to feel their emotional whirlwind alongside them.

This show has also led athletes across many sports to feel confident in coming out, including hockey players. Retired hockey player Jesse Kortuem made a post on Facebook this past January coming out to fans. He described how he felt he had to hide this side of himself while on the ice. Kortuem continued, saying “lately, something has sparked in me (ok – yes credit to #HeatedRivalry). I realized it is finally time to share a journey I have kept close to the vest for a long time.”

Later in the same post, he writes, “To my younger self, that identity could never be revealed. I did not think those two worlds could occupy the same person, let alone the same locker room. Coming out in the 2000s did not feel like an option, especially with so little positive representation in the media at the time and it would have been a social disaster at such a large high school.”

Creator and Director Jacob Tierny has been outspoken about his aims for the show. For example, during [his conversation on the What Chaos! Podcast](#), he said, “What I wanted to put out into the world was queer joy,” Creator and Director Jacob Tierny said it “was like the idea that we’re allowed to exist. We’re allowed to have sex. We’re allowed to be in love.”

Homophobia in the locker room, on the ice, and in the media leads many players to feel as though they have to hide themselves from the world. Heated Rivalry’s portrayal has provided a sense of belonging to many in the queer community, allowing them all to meet at the cottage.

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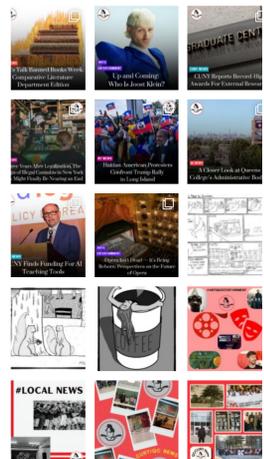
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