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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The 'Heated Rivalry' paradox — How LA's queer and BIPOC community is interrogating the HBO series

Shanna Hogan, Theresa Rebeck
Andrew Lamar, CBS News

By Dino-Ray Ramirez | The LA Local
Published March 5, 2026 1:00 AM

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This story first appeared on The LA Local.

In Los Angeles, the hashtag #HOTS ("Heated Rivalry" isn't just about the drama on ice, it's sparking heated debates off the rink.

Through her Substack, "Black Girl Watching" author and filmmaker Brooke Obie has been hosting in-person salons and online critique sessions about films like "Sinners" and the hit TV hockey romance.

"I believe in the power of criticism and the necessity of it as a tool to fight fascism and I am always going to create community spaces where we can think critically about the media we consume," Obie told The LA Local.

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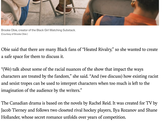
As the show's popularity grows, fans and advocates are asking whether its success reflects real inclusion or another moment of rainbow capitalism in sports.



Brooke Obie, creator of the Black Girl Watching Substack
Courtesy of Brooke Obie

Obie said that there are many Black fans of "Heated Rivalry," so she wanted to create a safe space for them to discuss it.

"Wiki talk about some of the racial nuances of the show that impact the ways characters are treated by the fandom," she said. "And (we discuss) how existing racist and sexist tropes can be used to interpret characters when too much is left to the imagination of the audience by the writers."

The Canadian drama is based on the novels by Rachel Reid. It was created for TV by Jacob Tierney and follows two closeted rival hockey players, Ryo Kazuno and Shane Hollander, whose secret romance unfolds over years of competition.

It premiered quietly on the streaming service Crave before being licensed to HBO Max, where it grew into what HBO executive Casey Bloys called a "word-of-mouth sensation," even with little marketing.

Front row: Shanna Hogan, Andrew Williams and Gigi Rayness. Screen: Shanna Hogan, Theresa Rebeck
Andrew Lamar, CBS News

The show's success has been swift and unusual, given its origins on a small Canadian streamer and lack of marquee names. Its stars, Connor Storrie (Ryo) and Hudson Williams (Shane), have appeared at awards shows, carried the Olympic torch and posed for glossy photo shoots. Social media is flooded with fan edits and watch parties.

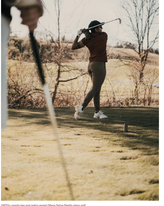
Recreational hockey leagues reported an uptick in queer participation.

But beneath the celebration, fans like Obie say the conversation is incomplete.

She said she noticed early on that online conversations about the show often lacked racial nuance — particularly around Shane, who is written as having a Japanese mother but rarely explores that cultural identity on screen.

"With a white author and a white showrunner at the helm, Shane's lack of culturally Japanese experiences is a clear weak spot in a fantastic show," Obie said.

Obie added that the goal of critical dialogue around the series is not to tear down the show but to create an inclusive space where LGBTQ+ fans of color and others in the margins can feel seen in a fandom that often skews white.



Josh Rawitscher announces the casting of his new reality series, "Who Are You?"
Courtesy of Josh Rawitscher

The show's impact has been positive for a sports culture that has historically marginalized queer athletes. Specifically, there has been a gamification of sports since the show's premiere, according to Emmy-winning producer Joel Bilanguage.

Bilanguage, who is developing a reality series focused on queer athletes, told The LA Local that he has seen more athletes willing to share their stories since the show premiered.

"We really have to eliminate that old mentality that being an athlete looks a certain way — like it's a monolith," Bilanguage said. "When in fact, it's so not."

He has received submissions from queer hockey players across the United States and Canada, including many from LA. Some are still closeted. Others say the show gave them courage to consider coming out.

Former professional golfer and LGBTQ+ sports law and policy expert Maya Satya Reddy said The LA Local that she has seen an influx of new queer hockey fans and increased interest in competitive recreational leagues such as Outload LA, She'They Sports, LGASA Softball and Lambda Basketball in Los Angeles.

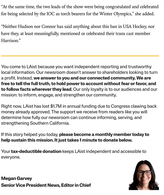
"The impact 'Heated Rivalry' has had on so many athletes and non-athletes alike, is incredible and something to be celebrated," Reddy said. "But describing it as revolutionary in changing queer and trans sports spaces is disingenuous. It's only been two months!"

Reddy, who is of South Asian descent, founded the Queer Asian Social Club, a Los Angeles-based LGBTQ+ advocacy group.

She said she left playing golf because of discrimination and pivoted to LGBTQ+ sports law and policy advocacy. She founded the Harvard Law School LGBTQ+ Sports Project and participated in programming for the first-ever Pride Day at PGA Championship.

"I have lived this," Reddy said. "I have seen firsthand, both personally through my athletic career, and professionally in my law and policy work the importance of representation and its shortcomings."

She celebrates "Heated Rivalry" but said there is still little effort to drive systemic change in the sport beyond the heavy attempt to capitalize financially on its success.



LGBTQ+ sports law and policy expert Maya Satya Reddy poses golf
Courtesy of Maya Satya

Since the show debuted, Williams and Storrie's fame has skyrocketed. So has that of their co-stars François Arnaud and Robbie G.K., who play characters that have a tertiary romance on the show.

"Hudson and Connor's invitation to be torch bearers is the perfect example of the impact this show has had on sports," said Reddy. "It is clear as day that the (International Olympic Committee) made this selection as a marketing ploy to capitalize on the craze."

Reddy points out that IOC President Kirsty Coventry has recently made it a 'core mission to target trans athletes.'

In June 2025, Coventry created a working group to review "protecting the female category." At the end of last year, it was reported that the IOC is considering a a policy that would bar transgender athletes from the Olympic Games, potentially affecting the 2028 games in Los Angeles.

Reddy also mentioned recent news of USA Hockey banning trans people from participating in certain programs. She noted that NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman, who praised "Heated Rivalry," is the same commissioner who faced backlash for banning promotional warm-up jerseys, which included Pride-themed jerseys as well as Pride tape on hockey sticks.

"I'm only aware of one person involved with 'Heated Rivalry' who spoke about any of this — Harrison Browne, a trans professional hockey player that appeared in the series," Reddy said.

"At the same time, the two leads of the show were being congratulated and celebrated for being selected by the IOC as torch bearers for the Winter Olympics," she added.

"Neither Hudson nor Connor has said anything about this ban in USA Hockey nor have they at least meaningfully mentioned or celebrated their trans cast member Harrison."

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