



Crave's Heated Rivalry hit the ice at breakneck speed

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Creator and director Jacob Tierney and producer Brendan Brady discuss how the hockey romance's unique approach and built-in fanbase attracted executive interest.

It took less than two years for Crave's original romantic drama *Heated Rivalry* to go from pitch to screen.

The 6 x 60-minute drama is based on the *Game Changers* book series by Nova Scotia-born author Rachel Reid, which follows two rival hockey players whose secret fling evolves into a passionate romance.

Writer and director Jacob Tierney produced *Heated Rivalry* with his production partner Brendan Brady under their shared banner Accent Aigu Entertainment. Reid is on board as a consulting producer, with Lori Fischburg also credited as a producer.

On paper, the IP's built-in audience and tantalizingly unique premise makes it a compelling project, but Tierney tells *Playback Daily* he was initially unsure if content executives would see the vision for the series.

"I love these books, they're smart, [but at the time I thought] 'I don't know if I'm going to get a lot of people to read this source material, and even if I do, maybe they'll get the wrong idea,'" he says. "I was wrong. Everybody read these books."

The series has already attracted **high-level sales** ahead of its Nov. 28 release on Crave, including a day-and-date premiere on HBO Max in the U.S. and Australia.

Financing and development

Heated Rivalry is the first series out of Toronto-based Accent Aigu, which Tierney and Brady formed in 2023 after working together on *Letterkenny* (Tierney was a co-creator, director and executive producer, and Brady a line producer) and, later, *Shoresy*.

Around the same time, Tierney spotted an article in the *Washington Post* about

the rise of hockey-themed romance novels and recognized Reid's book *Game Changers* from the list of titles, since he'd listened to the audiobook during the pandemic. He says he immediately knew he had to option the book, if the rights were still available.

Brady recalls hearing from Tierney about the idea to option a hockey romance book for a drama series. It was a departure from the strategic focus of the company at the time, which was comedy – though Brady notes that Accent Aigu is still developing several comedies.

"I wanted to work with Jacob because I trust his creative instincts, [so] I [said], 'look, if this is where you want to go, and this is the thing you are passionate about, God bless, let's do this,'" he says.

Tierney followed Reid on Instagram and struck up a conversation about optioning the books. "I didn't even know she was Canadian," he recalls. "She said, 'I'm a big fan of *Shoresy* and *Letterkenny*,' and I was like, 'Great, can I trick you into giving me your books?'"

They were able to option the rights by late September of that year, and started preparing to pitch the project to executives. Tierney decided to write the pilot script on spec, rather than the traditional outline and treatment, out of concern that executives wouldn't understand the appeal.

"One of the things that we're not running from [with] this project is: this is a Harlequin romance. This has a happy ending," says Tierney. "We want that for queer people ...where [characters] are allowed to be happy, healthy functioning people, and who have a sex life."

He soon learned those concerns were largely unfounded when executives started "lining up" to read the books.

"The way in which Jacob was talking about it really invigorated people, and they got on board with the vision," says Brady.

The team had initial conversations with a few buyers, but Tierney says Bell Media was the first place where they set up a formal pitch meeting.

Brady says they soon found the "perfect audience" with Rachel Goldstein-Couto, head of development for original programming at Bell Media, who "immediately" understood the concept.

"Jacob likes to say, 'I bought *Heated Rivalry* in the room,' which is essentially true," said Goldstein-Couto in a statement to *Playback*. "They provided a soft pitch for *Heated Rivalry*, and in the weeks that followed, the concept continued to intrigue me, leading me to read Rachel Reid's novel ... which I instantly fell in love with."

Goldstein-Couto did a "deep dive" into the world of male-to-male romance books

written for women in the lead-up to the pitch meeting, which partially inspired her decision to greenlight the series for development in March 2024. She said the other inspiration was Tierney's vision for the series to elevate it to a more serious drama.

"I wanted to get a bottle of wine and watch that show that night ... Not only would it undoubtedly resonate with a queer audience, who deserve such a series, it possessed the potential to reach a much wider demographic of women who enjoy their romance with an extra dash of smut, which is a vast and untapped audience. I believed it could become a channel-defining hit for Crave."

Things moved quickly from there as they built the bible and continued developing the scripts. The series was financed through Bell Media and its distribution arm Sphere Abacus, which holds international distribution rights, with Accent Aigu retaining original IP ownership. They also utilized Ontario's regional tax credits by shooting in Hamilton, Guelph and Muskoka.

By July 2024, *Heated Rivalry* was officially greenlit for production with a budget of less than \$5 million per episode.

Production and post-production

Once the series was formally commissioned, the first steps were to cast their leads and explore how they could film in multiple locations without breaking the bank. For the former, they hired Jenny Lewis and Sara Kay of Lewis Kay Casting to scout actors who could play convincingly as hockey players, which they found in the leads Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie.

They started hiring key production roles around October 2024, including director of photography Jackson Parrell, who suggested using virtual production during the job interview, having used it in prior commercial gigs.

"That was such a big asset going into this process because, in our show, we're supposed to be in Russia, at the Olympics, in Tampa Bay, on beaches. You're supposed to be everywhere," says Tierney, adding that he wanted to be able to "write within what is going to work" and not have to make Lake Ontario double for the Gulf of Mexico.

Enter Dark Slope Studios and its virtual production capabilities. The *Heated Rivalry* team completed a few test scenes to figure out what was technically possible with Dark Slope's LED volumes. After some trial and error, they found that the screens worked best with outdoor environments as a "living, breathing green screen," says Brady.

Utilizing the LED volumes meant reorienting the production process and the distribution of labour costs, since they needed to generate visuals during pre-

production instead of post. That required working with production designer Aidan Leroux and costume designer Hanna Puley to coordinate how the backgrounds and extras would look in those scenes, and what needed to be built on set.

The team estimates they spent more than two weeks building sets at Dark Slope ahead of principal photography on April 21.

"They had two stages there, so we had the virtual production stage, and then the other stage on the other side of their building," says Brady. "We were hopscotching between both sets."

Outside of Dark Slope, they filmed hockey game scenes at the Sleeman Centre in Guelph, Ont. and a cottage scene in Muskoka, in addition to other exteriors in Hamilton. Production wrapped on June 10.

Sales and marketing

Having a built-in audience from BookTok gave the team a clear direction in the marketing strategy, according to Brady.

"We identified early on in the process that we had a very active, very online community already baked into this property," he says.

According to a spokesperson for Bell Media, the marketing team launched an "internal book club" around Reid's *Game Changers*, learning more about the series' fandom and basing the promotional strategy on what would appeal to them.

That strategy included social media content with Easter eggs and behind-the-scenes exclusives to help generate viral moments. The team also had merchandise created to send to key BookTok influencers to increase engagement with the community, and launched a social media contest for fans to win free merch.

Other strategies outside of fan engagement included developing promotional content to air during major broadcast events, and adding the Crave logo to printed copies of the book in select retail stores.

The producers recall reading comments from fans in the lead-up to the series, discussing inside-baseball topics like its **market debut at MIPCOM** and encouraging each other to reach out to international platforms to buy the series so they could watch it legally in their countries.

While it's impossible to say what truly moved the needle – the fans, or the sales executives at Sphere Abacus – *Heated Rivalry* has already attracted significant buyers in the lead-up to its release. HBO Max acquired the series for the U.S. and Australia, while Sky picked it up for New Zealand and Movistar Plus+ for Spain.

"The sale of this show is a validation of a lot of hard work from hundreds of people and a testament to the power of a community that is hungry to see their favourite stories come to life," said Tierney and Brady in a statement on the sales, adding that more announcements are on the way.

The success also speaks to how the ethos of Accent Aigu has evolved since its founding in 2023. "We've been drawn to other people's passion projects. *Heated Rivalry* did not seem obvious to me, but what we found was that in this time of deep uncertainty in this industry ... who knows what anybody wants," says Tierney. "The more passionate [and] talented creators are, the more we want to be in business with them."

Image courtesy of Bell Media

