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JACOB TIERNEY ON THE SECRETS AND SUDDEN SUCCESS OF 'HEATED RIVALRY'

In his new book, I'll Believe In Anything, the Heated Rivalry showrunner goes behind the scenes of a romance built on bro-ey masculinity, body language, and bold creative choices



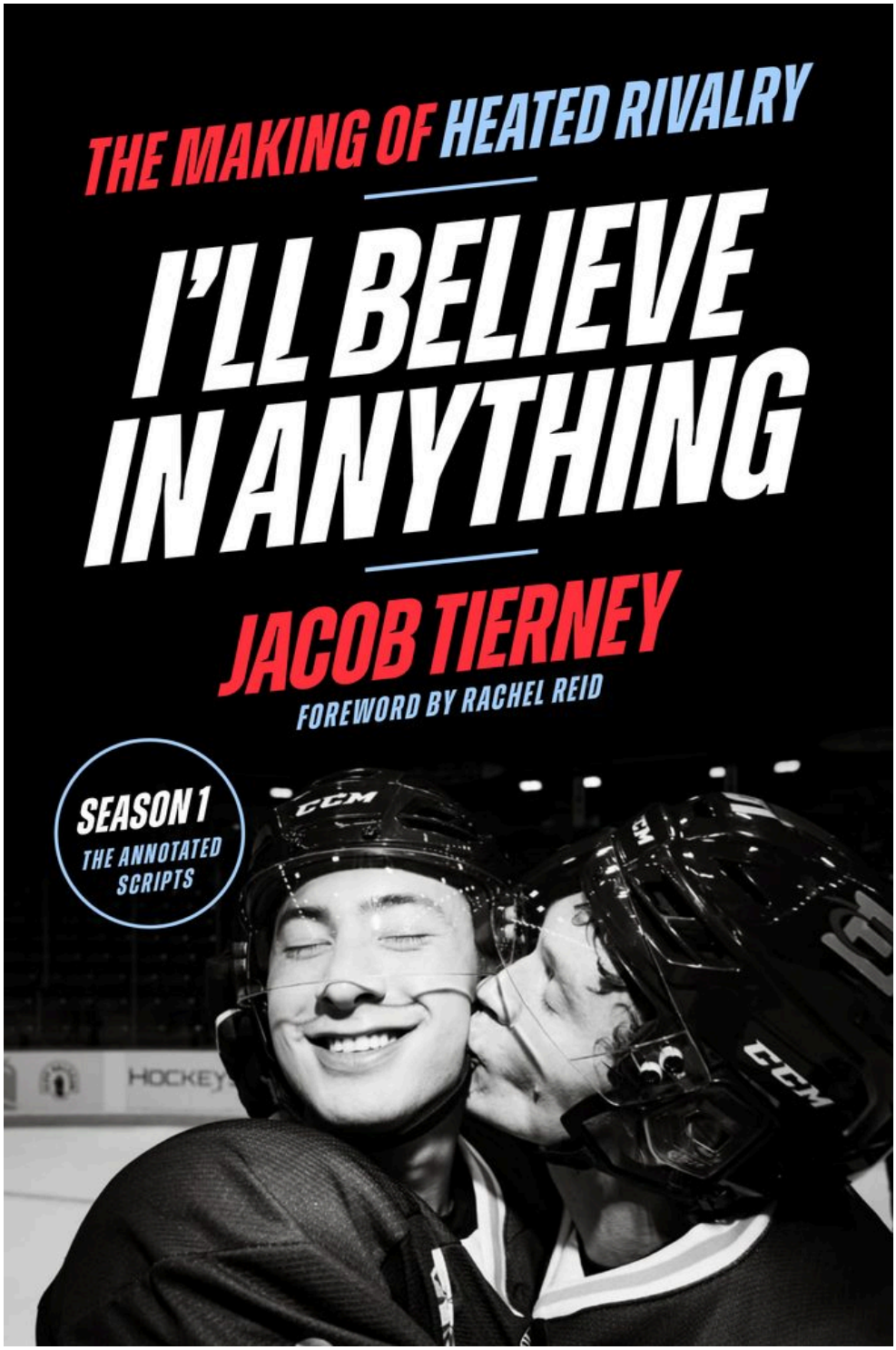
October 19, 2026

Text by Bernardo Sim

For most of the past year, the internet has been studying two hockey players' butts and bodies on screens big and small. Lead actors Connor Storrie (as Ilya Rozanov) and Hudson Williams (as Shane Hollander) starred in some of the most-watched queer sex scenes of all time, and Jacob Tierney, the showrunner behind *Heated Rivalry*, made sure we could see everything the right way. The last time I spoke with him, the TV show hadn't even premiered yet. It has since received a Peabody, a shelf full of Canadian Screen Awards, and a season-two renewal.

Tierney's new book, *I'll Believe in Anything: The Making of Heated Rivalry Season 1*, is a collection of annotated scripts that reveal candid details about adapting Rachel Reid's *Game*

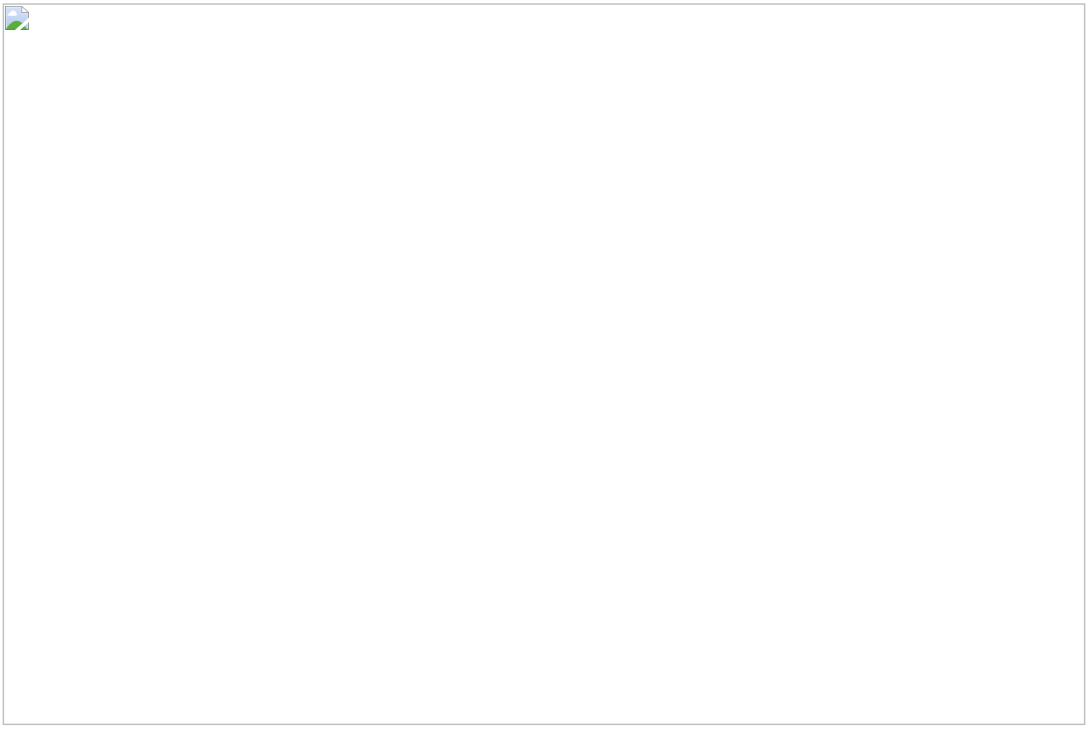
Changers series of novels to TV. The books treat sex as a character — Shane folding his clothes, Ilya's gaze commanding a room — and so does the showrunner.



Courtesy of Jacob Tierney

"Body language is everything. Every line they say to each other until episode five is bullshit," Tierney tells *VMAN*. "You have to see what they're doing, because everything that comes out of their mouth is obfuscation. That was something we were very aware of. It's very *bro-ey*, very masculine, very hockey."

He adds, “It’s not like they can’t find another guy with a great body or whatever. So this physical connection isn’t just shallow. What they reveal about themselves when they’re together, when they’re not talking, is absolutely the whole relationship.”



Courtesy of Jacob Tierney

Body language is also how gaydars beep, and how queer men cruise. “Ilya is endlessly cruising,” Tierney says. “Ilya is the one looking for connection. Ilya is a beacon. Every queer hockey player comes to Ilya. At some point, they find him, or he finds them,” within the *Game Changers* universe.

Comparatively, Scott Hunter (François Arnaud) is the total opposite. “Scott is *so afraid* that his gaydar is *shut off*. He doesn’t want to know if *anybody* is gay,” Tierney teases. “Scott is in full Ken-doll, big-brother mode, you know? ‘Hi, how are you? I am Scott, I am Captain America.’”

Scott and Kip (Robbie G.K.) get episode three to themselves, then a cathartic kiss on the ice rink in episode five, which has even straight men crying during watch parties. How did Tierney navigate the risk of audiences rejecting this other couple entering the narrative? Or perhaps even liking them too much, over the actual protagonists?

“I knew that we were doing something structurally different with this…But I liked the idea of devoting this time to them. I thought it was cleaner,” Tierney reflects. “François freaked out. [Laughs.] He called me, and he was like, ‘The show is doing really well. They’re going to hate me!’…I was like, ‘I don’t think they will!’”

Despite the show's budget constraints, no resources are spared in preparation for the sex scenes in *Heated Rivalry*, which are shot as long takes with minimal coverage. "You have to do that so the audience feels permission to observe them," Tierney says. "Seeing how one of them backs away a bit, and the other one comes forward, it tells you everything you need to know about that moment." This makes rewatching the scenes much more interesting, too. "Watch Ilya this time," he muses. "Next time, watch Shane."

Tierney is equally thoughtful when asked about Storrie and Williams's naked bodies going instantly viral amid the two-episode premiere of *Heated Rivalry*. "The care I take is with Connor and Hudson," he remarks. "Those are my friends. Those are my wards. I owe them a lot. We're intertwined. Their wellbeing and safety are very important to me."



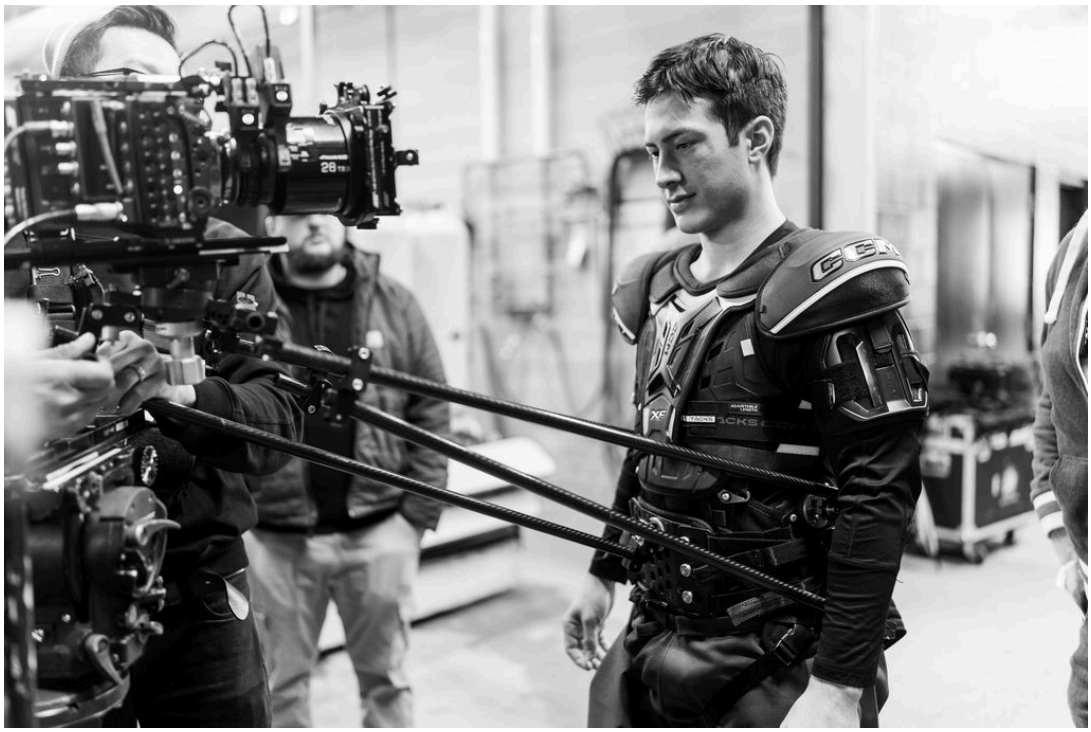
Courtesy of Jacob Tierney

"We just had our intimacy rehearsals for season two," he adds. "We went through all the stuff that we're going to go through again, and we try to make sure that they're really comfortable. They're still so close, and they're so game. They love these roles. They love doing it. They understood, from day one, that this is important."

Tierney admits, "I try to be very conscious that it hasn't even been a year since this show's been out, and they're arguably two of the most famous people in the world. It's fucking crazy, and there's nothing that can prepare you for that. There's no handbook to it. So, we just check in a lot. 'You good?' 'You need anything?'"

So when did he clock the scale of the *Heated Rivalry* phenomenon? "The HBO Golden Globes party in LA," Tierney says. "Brendan [Brady] and I were there before Connor and Hudson arrived.

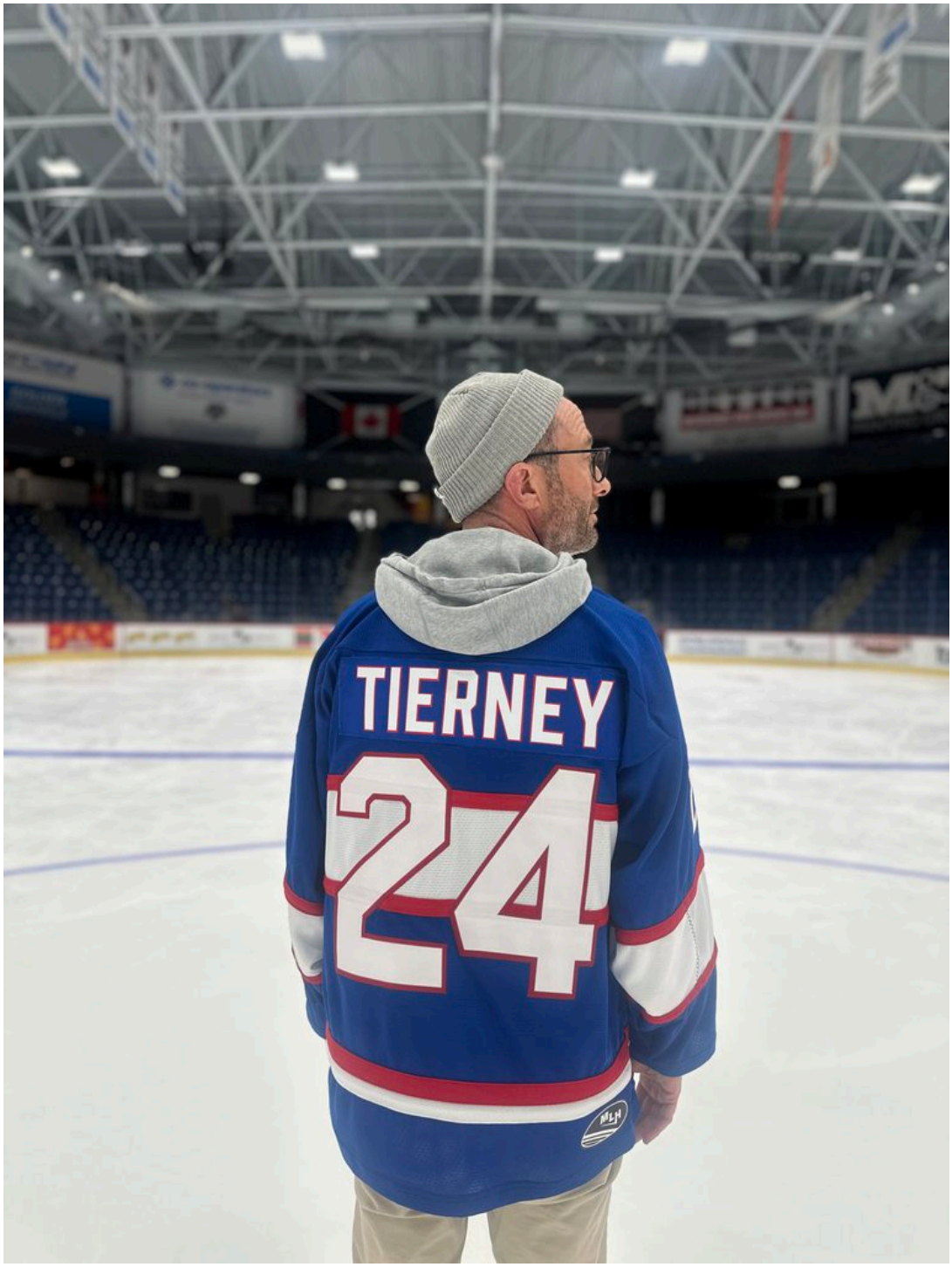
And then they did, and I was like, 'Are they the most famous people here?'"



Heated Rivalry – Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander in Episode 105 BTS of Heated Rivalry. Cr. Sabrina Lantos © 2025

He recalls seeing a "very famous movie star awkwardly trying to figure out how to come over, and what to say." His takeaway? "This is fucking nuts."

I'll Believe in Anything: The Making of Heated Rivalry Season 1 is out now from Little, Brown and Company. Season two of *Heated Rivalry* is expected to premiere in Spring 2027. Rachel Reid's final novel about Ilya and Shane, *Unrivaled*, is set for release on June 1, 2027.



Courtesy of Jacob Tierney

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