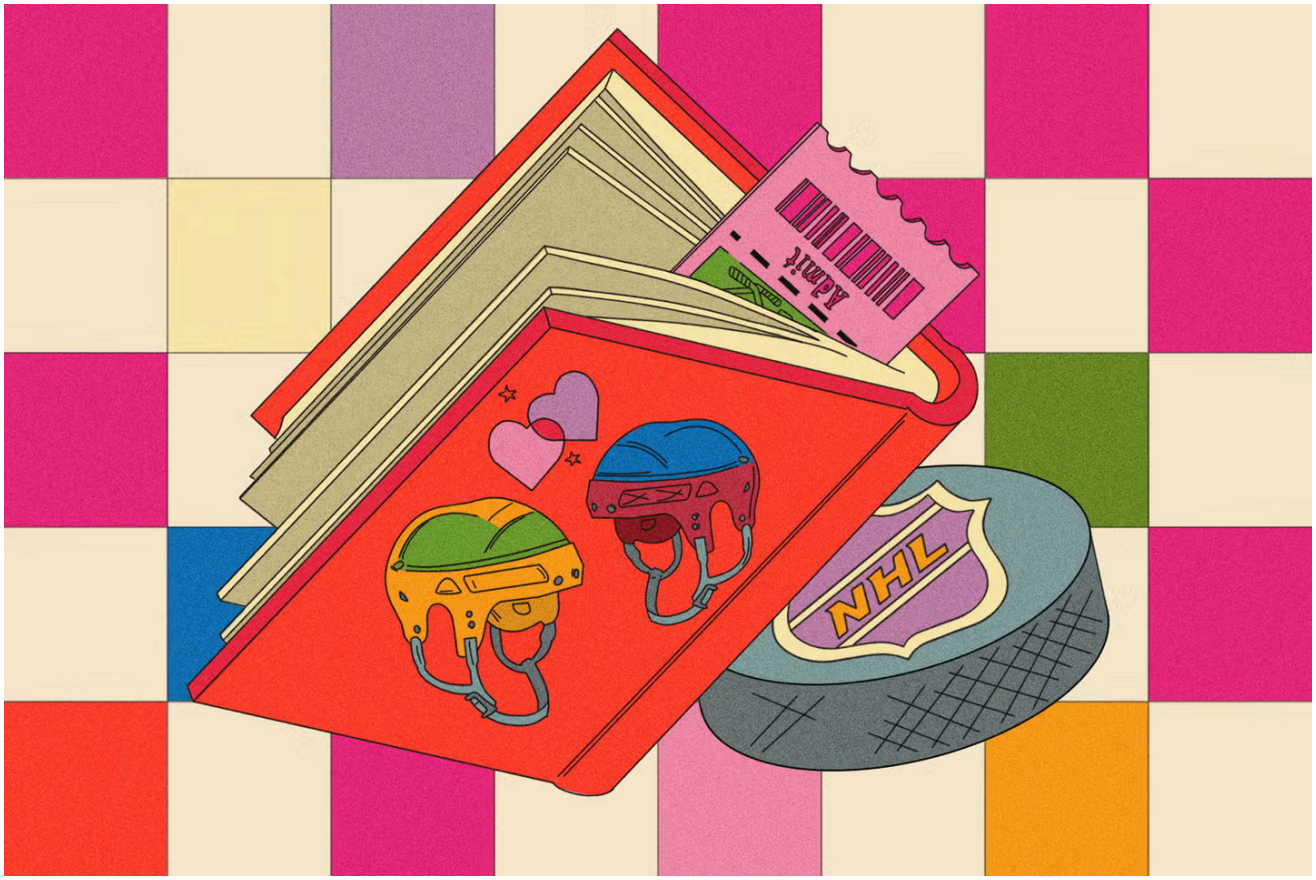
The NHL is trying to capitalize on hockey romance — but so far it's missed the mark



Can the NHL turn the attention brought by popular hockey-romance novels and TV shows into lasting fandom? Kelsea Petersen / The Athletic



By **Kaitlyn Pohly**

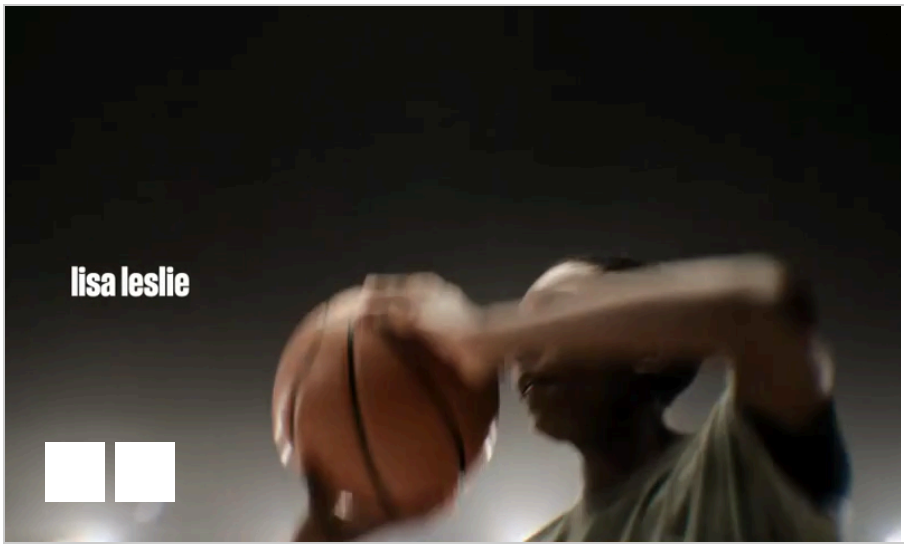
Oct. 21, 2026

Share article 118

On a cool March evening in Nashville, hundreds of hockey-romance readers filled the concourse of Bridgestone Arena. They posed for photographs, collected autographs and goodie bags, and met authors invited by the Predators for the team's first themed "Hockey Romance Night."

had come through the pages of romance novels.

ADVERTISEMENT



Every shot counts.
So does every investment.®
Get the power of the S&P 500 with SPY, the original ETF.
Learn more

Hockey romance, a subgenre of sports romance novels, follows fictional hockey players as they navigate love and relationships on and off the ice. The books have found an enthusiastic audience on BookTok, the corner of TikTok where readers and authors share recommendations, reviews and reactions to books. The platform has become a powerful promotional tool for publishers. In 2024 alone, approximately 59 million print book sales in the U.S. could be linked to BookTok-related creators or content, according to Circana BookScan.

The genre's popularity has extended beyond the page, with several bestselling hockey romances making the leap to television. "Heated Rivalry," originally a novel by Rachel Reid, debuted on HBO Max in November 2025. Then came "Off Campus" on Amazon Prime Video, inspired by Elle Kennedy's bestselling series. Now, Netflix is developing an adaptation of Hannah Grace's wildly popular "Icebreaker."

For Lexi LaFleur Brown, one of the eight authors invited to the event in Nashville, the genre weaves together nearly every strand of her life. She grew up playing hockey in Northern Ontario and watched her husband, J.T. Brown, play parts of seven seasons in the NHL. Now, she writes fictional hockey romances. Her novel "Shoot Your Shot" climbed the USA Today bestseller list.

The NHL tried to woo romance fans. It missed the mark.

Kaitlyn Pohly, Johnny Sweet and more

Standing among hundreds of readers gathered for a group photo beneath the video board at center ice, LaFleur Brown saw how naturally hockey romance could lead readers toward the real game: Start with the books, build a community and invite readers into the fandom.

"It takes that online BookTok community and lets everybody meet in person," LaFleur Brown said. "It creates a safe space for people who maybe are new to hockey."

commissioner Gary Bettman said he binge-watched — Disney released "The Mighty Ducks" in 1992, which became a cultural phenomenon.

The league sees another opportunity to capitalize on hockey's pop culture appeal, with evidence that more women are tuning in. Female NHL viewership increased by roughly 70 percent last season, according to league data, a surge the league attributed in part to the popularity of shows such as "Heated Rivalry."

For the NHL, the challenge is turning that newfound attention into lasting fandom.

The Nashville event offered one blueprint for bringing hockey-romance readers into the sport. Months later, the NHL tried another.

At the start of the 2026-27 NHL season, the league released "Hot for Hockey," a series of seven short audio stories designed to capitalize on the popularity of hockey romance. As Bettman said at a season-opening press conference: "Since it seems to be a cultural phenomenon, we figured why not get on board."

Led by the league's newly hired chief marketing officer Sean Eggert, the campaign enlisted hockey-romance authors such as C.R. Jane, along with illustrators and voice

they declined to participate.



"This was one small way to give a playful nod to something that's clearly going on in the cultural zeitgeist — among many different marketing activations," a league spokesperson told *The Athletic*.

On the NHL's opening day, Sept. 29, the league released all seven installments featuring six players on Spotify. The titles included "Chasing Connor," featuring Connor McDavid; "Jack of Hearts," centered on Jack Eichel; and "The Summer I Turned Gritty," about Trevor Zegras' reinvention in Philadelphia.

"One heated summer later, Philly's pretty boy is looking a whole lot grittier," the Zegras story said.



Hockey dominates the sports romance genre. #HockeyRomance has over 700,000 posts on TikTok. In comparison, #FootballRomance only has 100,000. Lindsey Nicholson / UCG / Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Most lasted between 30 and 90 seconds and, while they contained no actual scripted romance, they borrowed the evocative, dramatic storytelling style of a typical romance audiobook. The NHL confirmed to *The Athletic* that the featured players approved the content. The NHLPA said it was not involved in the campaign and declined to comment.

Each episode ended with a call to action: "Tune into the NHL all season long for more hockey love."

But less than a week later, the episodes were removed from Spotify. The NHL said that was always the plan.

The league described the series as an opening-week promotion and said the closing message was meant to encourage fans to watch hockey throughout the season, not to promise additional episodes.

Even before the episodes disappeared, the campaign had drawn sharp criticism from hockey and hockey-romance fans.

"What a f—king fiasco," said Maggie Bazdarick, a romance author and fan from southwestern Ontario. Bazdarick writes under the pen name Luna Frost and is known as "Moony" across online hockey-romance communities like TikTok, Reddit and Discord.

For Bazdarick, the problem wasn't the league's recognition of hockey romance. It was the decision to put real NHL players at the center of stories inspired by a genre built around fictional characters. She worried that the campaign could encourage the kind of parasocial relationships that blur the boundaries between athletes and fans, pointing to a 2023 controversy in which Seattle Kraken forward Alex Wennberg and his wife publicly condemned sexually suggestive comments from some members of the BookTok community. The Kraken, which had previously embraced the attention through its own social media posts, subsequently removed their BookTok-related content.

"It's a dangerous line," LaFleur Brown said of marketing real hockey players as romance characters versus marketing hockey to romance readers.

Tory Lindberg, a 31-year-old BookTok creator from Ohio, drew a similar distinction. "They are not your book boyfriends," Lindberg said of real NHL players. "You don't go to the games and expect them to be those characters that are not real."

The league's broader response to the pop-culture moment has also drawn criticism. Jacob Tierney, the creator and director of "Heated Rivalry," said in a recent SiriusXM interview that the NHL was not "meeting the moment" presented by the show's popularity, although he didn't comment on the "Hot for Hockey" campaign specifically.

Hockey romance predates its television success. In 2015, Kennedy first published "The Deal." It was her first novel in the "Off Campus" series, a collection of five books focusing on a hockey team (and their romantic interests) at the fictional Briar University. More than a decade later, the series' television adaptation drew more than 36 million viewers in its first 12 days of streaming.

Lauren Blakely, a bestselling romance author, had previously written about baseball and football players. But as love stories featuring fictional hockey players and their romances gained traction online, she followed her readers onto the ice, publishing her first hockey romance, "Double Pucked," in 2023.

"You go where the readers are, and they were in hockey," Blakely said.

What makes hockey especially appealing to romance writers? Blakely called it the "million-dollar question." One possibility is the sport's unusual combination of elegance and physicality: Players glide across the ice one moment and crash into opponents the next. Another is the intimacy of the experience for spectators, who can sit just inches from the action. Plus, the sport's physicality makes it a natural setting for the familiar romantic trope of a "tough guy with a soft side."

Sports romance recorded triple-digit growth in print sales in 2025, according to publishing industry data firm Circana. Grace's "Icebreaker" has sold more than 5 million copies.

Increasingly, that enthusiasm is carrying readers beyond the pages of their books and into hockey arenas. At book tours and author events, Blakely has met readers who spent years immersed in fictional hockey worlds before finally attending their first game and discovering a passion for the real sport.

For Blakely and LaFleur Brown, one of the most promising ways to bring hockey-romance readers into the sport is also the simplest: Start with the books themselves.

"I get so many invitations to do book fairs at sports arenas," Blakely said. "That's probably going to be one of the more successful ways of getting readers into the sport."

At a book event hosted by the NBA's Charlotte Hornets, Blakely said roughly 600 people attended on game day. Hockey teams have begun experimenting with similar events, including the Predators' "Hockey Romance Night" in Nashville.

For LaFleur Brown, the appeal of these events goes beyond meeting authors or taking home exclusive merchandise. They turn online communities into real-world ones, with hockey as the common ground.

"It connects romance readership to the sports world in a way that, to me, feels more authentic than efforts to romanticize the sport," Blakely said. "It's important to remember that what we are writing and reading is a romanticized version of hockey."

Getting romance readers through the arena doors is one thing. Giving them a reason to come back is another.

Lindberg once read hockey-romance novels in the back of Ubers and taxis on her way to Blue Jackets games when her husband worked for the team. But as her interest in the sport deepened, she found herself reaching for those books less often. It wasn't literary tropes or themed ticket packages that made her a diehard fan. It was having friends and family she could turn to with questions, getting to know the players and learning the team's history.



Fans at this year's NHL Unites Pride Cup in Surrey, B.C., pose with a "Heated Rivalry" flag. The NHL says it has seen a surge of interest since the hit TV show debuted last year. Jeff Vinnick / NHLI via Getty Images

history.

For LaFleur Brown, a sense of belonging in the sport goes beyond recognition. It's also about the environment fans encounter when they enter the sport.

In her novels, she creates a fictional hockey world where women, queer readers and people of color can see themselves. But she knows that world doesn't always resemble the real one.

"My readers are women. They're queer people. They're BIPOC people. I want people to be able to pick up a book and know that it's a safe space for them to escape, and that's definitely not the case when it comes to men's hockey."

LaFleur Brown said the NHL could do more to foster that sense of belonging through meaningful community engagement, support for Pride and Black History Month celebrations and changes to league policies. She pointed to the league's lack of a formal domestic violence policy as a potential barrier for women who might otherwise embrace the sport. By contrast, the NFL, NBA and MLB all have policies explicitly addressing domestic violence, including procedures for investigating allegations and disciplining players.

"That's really what we want from the league," she said. "We don't need these 'Hot for Hockey' audios. We just want to feel safe and included."

their nearest bookstore. Instead, it's to recognize that those readers might discover something entirely different to love about the real sport on the ice.

"What readers get out of a hockey romance is not the same thing they get out of a hockey game," she said. "They fulfill different emotional and entertainment needs."

That doesn't make the crossover any less valuable.

"When you start with the books and bring the fans into the arena, that feels like a more natural path to capitalizing on the love of hockey romance and trying to win over those fans," Blakely said. "I think the league should try to meet the readers where they are."

Kaitlyn Pohly covers the NHL and all things hockey for The Athletic. A recent graduate of Yale University, she's previously worked at ESPN, Bloomberg and The Miami Herald.

Tagged To: Culture, NHL, Sports Business

YOUR NEXT READ

LATEST LEAGUE STORIES

LATEST HEADLINES

OCT 23, 2026

SPONSORED BY

Connections: Sports Edition

Find the hidden link between sports terms

Play today's puzzle ›

Fantasy Baseball
Fantasy Basketball
Fantasy Football
Fantasy Hockey
Fantasy Premier League
FIFA Club World Cup
FIFA Men's World Cup
FIFA Women's World Cup
Formula 1
Gaming
Global Sports
Golf
International Football
La Liga
League Cup
League One
League Two
Liga MX
Ligue 1
Memorabilia & Collectibles
Men's College Basketball
Men's Olympic Ice Hockey
Headlines

Premier League
Sailing
Scottish Premiership
Serie A
Six Nations
Soccer
Sports Betting
Sports Business
Super League
Tennis
Top Sports News
WNBA
Women's Champions League
Women's College Basketball
Women's Euros
Women's Hockey
Women's Olympic Ice Hockey
Women's Soccer
Women's Super League
World Baseball Classic
The Athletic Ink
Podcasts

Indiana
Jacksonville
Kansas City
Las Vegas
Los Angeles

St. Louis
Tampa Bay
Utah
Washington DC
Wisconsin

Connections: Soccer

Editions

International
U.S.

Forgot Password?
Contact Us
Terms of Service

Newsletters

The Pulse
The Bounce
The Windup
Prime Tire
Full Time
Until Saturday
NFL Newsletter
The Athletic FC
MoneyCall
Red Light
Peak
No Offseason

©2026 The Athletic Media Company, A New York Times Company Your Privacy Choices Privacy Policy Cookie Policy Support

Sitemap