Shane Hollander Is Not Here to Explain Himself

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by theaa

Summary

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When I initially booked this interview, I expected to be asked to meet in Ottawa, perhaps even New York, as Hollander has plenty of sponsorship deals that keep him busy, even in the summer months when hockey is on a break. I expected to be fitted in, that is. The current Alternate Captain for the Ottawa Centaurs has never given access like this before, and, frankly, I was unsure how much he'd be willing to share.

Notes

Wanted to try my hand at one of these. Thanks to Rory for the vibe check.

See the end of the work for more notes

Shane Hollander Is Not Here to Explain Himself

After shocking the NHL last year by revealing his relationship with his fellow player and long-time rival, the Russian Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander wants to set the narrative straight. His hockey does the talking just fine.

By Sports Editor
August 24th, 2022

July 29th, 2008, in Muskoka was a balmy summer evening. It is every Canadian's dream to spend such an evening outside, lounging by a roaring fire pit, listening to the gentle sound of the lake lapping against the dock, as the sun sets spectacularly over the water. Seventeen-year-old **Shane Hollander**, however, had shut himself up in the family computer room at his parents' central Ontario cottage. "It was really my dad's computer," Hollander tells me now. "For work stuff, but I hogged it a lot that summer. To the point my mom got annoyed with me about it."

It was not, as might be expected, traditional teenage surliness that had Hollander avoiding his parents. Drafted first overall by the Ontario Hockey League to the Erie Otters when he was just fifteen, Hollander was already a widely reputed, well-established hockey phenom. In his previous season for the Otters, he scored 51 goals and notched over 60 assists, which etched his name firmly onto the team records. In fact, it made him the scoring leader not only in the OHL that season, but also across the Canadian Hockey League as a whole. The OHL — which is not a professional league and does not pay its players more than a minimal stipend — rushed to celebrate Hollander's achievements. Attendance at Otter games skyrocketed, resulting in packed barns, night after night. Hollander was big business. To many, it seemed he was the second coming of Wayne Gretzky himself.

You could be forgiven, therefore, for assuming that Hollander might have been looking to take some of that pressure off by indulging, via his father's computer, in some typical teenage web-surfing or gaming in the off-season, while he could. You'd be wrong, though. Hollander had long been considered one of the top prospects for his draft year, and with the 2008 NHL draft about to occur the following evening, many sports outlets, scouts and pundits had turned their attention already to 2009's class, creating mock-ups — with the acknowledged get-out-of-jail-free-card that it was much too early. Hollander had a habit of inhaling them all anyway.

"It probably wasn't very healthy," he muses now. "I can get a bit obsessive over stuff, I guess. I don't think it was good for me, necessarily, to read all that. The good and the bad."

But Hollander was not just reading about himself. Sports drafts, if you possess the right temperament to consider them such, are inherently Romantic, big 'R.' At their core, they

decide an athlete's career and set them on a course for the rest of their playing lives and beyond. Drafts shape and set in stone the futures of franchises. They are fate, set in motion. Imagine, now, your favorite player being drafted to a different team, and the ways in which it would irrevocably change sporting history — and their own personal history, too. The years and months leading up to the draft slowly solidify this process, and a year out, everything was very much still up in the air. On that July evening, for the first time, Hollander saw a name other than his own ranked at number one.

Ilya Rozanov, a forward for the KHL team CSKA Moscow, was being pitched as the new potential first overall. His write-up praised his size, speed, and aggressive playing style, while also noting that Rozanov's hockey IQ was pin-sharp. As a KHL player, his draft profile had taken some time to filter into the American-Canadian system, but now, everywhere Hollander looked, Rozanov was being lauded. How did he feel, reading about his potential usurper?

Hollander smiles faintly. "Oh, I was devastated. A lot of places still had me at number one. But Ilya was right up there, all of a sudden. I couldn't avoid him. I was obsessed with him."

And so began another thread of hockey's red string of fate. In the 2009 draft the following July, the Boston Bears drafted nineteen-year-old center Ilya Rozanov first overall, leaving Hollander to slip to second, selected by Montreal. Boston has long had a reputation for prizing players with size and a scrappy streak, whereas Hollander's poise and perfect French made him a much better fit for the more traditional Voyageurs. Falling in the draft stung, but the fates had rolled their dice. "I was really mad," Hollander remembers. "Like *really* mad. I'm sure it was very funny how pissed I was. But at the same time, I still remember trying to tell myself that things had happened for a reason. That's what my family told me, too."

Hollander, at eighteen, tried to ignore the way the stars had aligned, fighting his initial disappointment. Once it had finally faded, he realized that he and Rozanov, so closely bound already by their pre-draft competition, were now positioned as the future stars of warring franchises, two of the big original six teams. Future captain material, they were primed to have a rivalry for the ages. "I also wasn't sure if I liked him or not, to be brutally honest," Hollander adds.

So, did he and Rozanov submit to the roles they were expected to play? Here, Hollander breaks into his first genuine smile. "Not exactly," he replies. "It was a very long process of trying to get away from the idea of who we were expected to be, I think."

A long process is putting it very lightly.

Now thirty-one, Hollander is sitting across from me on a soft leather couch, part of a home study in the Muskoka lake house he owns. (His parents' cottage, the one from his childhood, is a ten-minute drive away.) It's a tastefully decorated room, with big ceiling-high windows that let in plenty of summer light, and walnut shelves full of books — mostly sports-related. Hollander looks at home here, dressed in a loose pair of light-wash jeans and a plain navy t-shirt, which shows off his impressive arm muscle. Everything is just the right side of comfortably casual. When I initially booked this interview, I expected to be asked to meet in Ottawa, perhaps even New York, as Hollander has plenty of sponsorship deals that keep him busy, even in the summer months when hockey is on a break. I expected to be fitted in, that

is. The current Alternate Captain for the Ottawa Centaurs has never given access like this before, and, frankly, I was unsure how much he'd be willing to share.

Privacy is justifiably a concern for Hollander: he and Rozanov were forcibly outed by an errant Fanmail video, posted by Hollander's then Montreal Voyageurs teammate, Hayden Pike, in March of 2021. The video inadvertently revealed Hollander and Rozanov embracing in a way that made their attachment to each other exceedingly clear. Needless to say, it ripped through both the internet and the league like wildfire. Subsequently, the two announced their years-long relationship through a joint statement. Though Hollander and Rozanov were not the first queer players in the league, they were the first to reveal to each be dating another player — an element made more shocking by the long, much-amplified adversary between Montreal and Rozanov's original team, Boston, and to a lesser extent, Montreal's Canadian rival, Ottawa. The idea that they had been together when playing on opposing teams, especially during the Montreal-Boston period, was — to some fervent fans — more scandalous than the reveal of their sexualities.

He and Rozanov stood as a united front, but Hollander admits the necessary decision to come out publicly was "difficult." According to Hollander, he'd spent a lot of time trying to avoid exactly that. "Which wasn't healthy either," he impresses, "and I realize that now. I can't change what happened, but…" He wishes he had more control over the method? Hollander nods. "Yes. It would have been nice."

When I bring up the reception to his and Rozanov's relationship, he shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "There were idiots on social media, obviously," he says. "Ilya had a better stomach for that stuff than I did. I know we did get support, but I think there are always going to be certain people on the internet who are doing it for the wrong reasons. I try not to give them my time or energy."

And what about the league? Hollander and Rozanov's story, plus those of Scott Hunter, a player for the New York Admirals who came out via a sweepingly romantic post-Stanley Cup win kiss with his boyfriend at center ice in 2017, plus a few other players, are individuals who have made the decision to take up space in the league as their queer, authentic selves. Meanwhile, the NHL's lackluster You Can Play initiative (which seemed at times to operate in a similar fashion to the Don't Ask Don't Tell rule) trickled out of the conversation years ago. Pride Nights are inconsistent across the 32 teams, and there is no one, seemingly, at the top who is taking responsibility for making the league a more diverse, inclusive space for fans and players alike. Hollander and Rozanov's statement inspired a short, ambiguously supportive one in return from the league's commissioner, Roger Crowell, which emphasized Hollander and Rozanov's individual careers rather than their relationship. In the following off season as a free agent, Hollander left the team he'd won three Stanley Cups with and signed with the Ottawa Centaurs at a hefty hometown discount "to be closer to my family," — which includes Ottawa's captain, Rozanov, whom Hollander married last summer. They have kept their surnames — "no space on the jerseys," Hollander quips, with a rare grin — but have gone double-barralled on official paperwork, he confirms.

"I don't want to diminish my time with Montreal," Hollander says carefully. "I obviously won the cup with them three times, and I cherish those memories, but signing with Ottawa was an easy decision, and the right one."

So he doesn't regret leaving the franchise that drafted him, and that shaped his career? Spend any time in Montreal, and you are still guaranteed to spot a Hollander jersey in the crowd — and not just at games either. Three Stanley Cup wins earn you legendary status in the city. Hollander is a household name.

"Obviously, I have some regrets," he allows, folding his hands in his lap. It's a beautiful July day, and when Hollander glances out of his study window at the idyllic sliver of lake just beyond, I get the feeling he'd prefer not to answer my question. It is easy to see him steel himself before he answers. "I gave a lot of years to the franchise, some of my best hockey. It's an amazing city to live and work in. I wish the end were better. There are some good people in that organization, but it was the right move for everyone to part ways, I think. It was mutual."

Hollander's diplomacy is exemplary, but revealing nonetheless. Montreal lost a star player at the height of his success, and Paul Theriault, Montreal's head coach, was fired at the All Star break. Officially, the Voyageurs' dismal first half of the season was the cause, but social media has been abounding with rumors regarding the Voyageurs' culture problem since Hollander's exit, including accusations of bullying and homophobia at the top level. When I press Hollander on these details, however, he won't be led.

"I know what was said in that room, and the public knows which team I signed with. I think the Centaurs' messaging is clear. I think where I stand is clear." And here he pauses, embodying the seriousness he is well-known for in his post-game interviews. Hollander's answers are always carefully constructed. "And I think it's clear that there's a lot in the league that still needs to change."

The statement is entirely in entirely inkeeping for someone who is a perennial candidate for the King Clancy award, a trophy given by the NHL to players who demonstrate good sportsmanship, leadership qualities and contribute positively to the community. The award has earned criticism in recent years for being an empty gesture toward the sort of change Hollander is an advocate for. It's perhaps significant that, while a multi-nominee for his prominence among both the Asian and now the queer community, Hollander has never won the award. This year's recipient was Toronto Guardians forward Colsen Green, who had a season-long partnership with a local children's hospital that matched donations to his points tally. Back in 2018, Scott Hunter became a vocal spokesperson for LGBT inclusivity, building on the league's weak (and perhaps purposefully wide) 'Hockey is for everyone' messaging. He has not been nominated since. Some causes, to the NHL at least, are more palatable than others.

When there is a knock on the door, Hollander looks up gratefully. It is his mother, Yuna Hollander, come to relieve her son of this part of the interview. Hollander stands and promises me that he'll be back later. I suspect he would rather run for the Muskoka hills, but I also appreciate his integrity, which is evident to anyone who speaks to him, so I feel safe in letting him go.

His mother — petite, regal, business-like — takes his place and encourages me to join her outside. The cottage is nestled against the lakeshore. It's a stunning piece of architecture, mostly made of vaulted windows that reflect the lush greenery surround. Everything is very

open and fresh. I understand Hollander's attachment to it and why he wanted to conduct the interview here instead of in a nondescript hotel lobby bar. Thinking feels easier out here, I suggest to Yuna Hollander.

She nods her head. "That's why Shane likes it. It reassures me to know he has a space like this to return to every year."

As Yuna guides me to a pair of classic Adirondack chairs by the jetty, I steer the conversation towards her most obvious connection to her son's hockey. I was in contact with both Yuna and Hollander's agent when arranging this interview — Yuna takes a surprisingly active role in her son's career.

At first, she winces a little at the assessment. "What you have to understand," she begins, adjusting the Ottawa Centaurs cap she picked up on the way out of the house over her dark hair, "is that when Shane was younger, he was very good at hockey, but I knew that hockey might not be very good to him. I'm a lifelong fan of the sport — the Voyaguers were my team when I was younger — I still think about their 93' cup win all the time — but I also knew, as an Asian woman, that I didn't really fit the usual idea of a hockey fan. And if I didn't, then Shane certainly wouldn't as a player."

Yuna Hollander grew up in Montreal, a third-generation immigrant who keenly felt her otherness. Her parents were second-generation *Nisei*. It was her grandparents who had originally immigrated to Vancouver in the late 1930s. Canadian Anti-Asian war policy in the early 1940s saw them, and thousands of others, forcibly removed and interred in British Columbia in alternative 'work sites'. They were camps. By the mid 1940s, the camps' inhabitants were finally released, on the condition that they vacate British Columbia. Though a formal apology from the Canadian government came in 1988, it's a period of Canadian history that is still largely undiscussed and ungrappled with. Yuna's grandparents headed east and settled in Montreal, where they rebuilt their life and their family, brick by brick. Yuna was raised in the shadow of their work ethic, she says. As a child, she didn't appreciate the trauma they had gone through, but she knew that her family, while they worked hard, were a minority.

Yuna describes her own upbringing as "strict but warm." It was her father who first introduced her to hockey, thanks to its omnipresence in Montreal, although her interest in the game rapidly overtook his. She did well in school, but her family weren't able to send her to college. Instead, after high school, Yuna took night classes while she juggled helping out at her parents' accounting business. The classes were, though not affiliated with the university, on the McGill campus. It was at a bar nearby that she met her future husband and at-the-time McGill undergraduate David Hollander, who was also studying business — and playing on the school's prestigious hockey team. Her parents were initially skeptical of the match, bemused by their daughter's choice to date outside of the tight-knit Japanese community in Montreal. "But David charmed them," she adds with a small laugh. "He was very polite, which they appreciated."

As Shane was growing up, Yuna was still a passionate hockey fan. She and David wanted to put their son into a sports programme to keep him active, and Shane seemed to enjoy skating as a young child. "He was an antsy kid, but strap a pair of skates on him, and he'd go quiet —

in a good way," Yuna reflects. "He loved it. At the time, I wasn't thinking of anything more than that." Yuna shares a few stereotypical stories probably very familiar to other hockey parents — Shane practicing his stick handling in the basement until his parents were forced to be firm about bedtimes, Shane trying to take his hockey equipment on a family trip to his aunt's house, unwilling to be away from the sport for even a long weekend, Shane wearing a hole in the family garage door thanks to all the puck shooting in the driveway. His obsession was rewarded: as he played his way through the junior system, it became clear that Shane possessed a talent and an aptitude for the sport. "Obviously, I was aware that hockey is very white-dominated," Yuna tells me sharply. "But I didn't see why that should bar his access. I didn't want it to." Shane continued to succeed. He was one of two Asian kids in his junior team. By the time he'd graduated to Peewee, he was on his own, and the scouts had started to come knocking.

When I ask what age this was, Yuna sighs. "When he was 12, I sat him down before a game and explained that lots of people were going to doubt how good he was, because of his heritage, and that he shouldn't let them. I told him he'd have to work hard and show them how wrong they were."

Shane must have internalised that message. His discipline and ability to pull off perfect set-piece goals are well-renowned throughout the league. You'd be extremely hard-pressed to find a reporter who ever felt that Hollander's interviews were short or unpleasant, even after brutal games that did not go his or his team's way. With his mother's help, he racked up sponsorship deals, from fragrance to soda drinks, to protein powder, to the fabled Rolex partnership. Shane was Rolex's first Asian athlete ambassador across any sport. To Yuna Hollander, that achievement *meant* something. It both established and safeguarded her son as indispensable to the league, raising his profile further. And yet still, for many, he didn't put a foot wrong — until he was caught on camera with Rozanov, that is.

"I think it was worse for Shane, because he's always been so careful," Yuna reflects. "He wanted people to respect him and his game so badly."

When I mention that this must have been a profoundly isolating experience for her son — that it must have taken Shane a lot of energy to meet the standards that he thought were expected of him — what a destabilising event his forced coming out must have been — Yuna turns back towards the water and readjusts her cap.

"What we have learnt, as a family, is that we have to give both ourselves and each other grace," she says solemnly. "We could all do with easing off the pressure. Shane and I have talked about that."

As she guides me back to the house, Yuna is quiet, stopping only to observe the hockey paraphernalia abandoned on the drive — a tangle of gloves, roller blades, sticks and pucks. "See?" she points out. "They're still just boys, at the end of the day." When I express mock-surprise that Shane would leave out his equipment like that, she grins at me. It looks a lot like the rare expression her son offered me earlier. "Oh, that's all Ilya's influence." She shoots me a softer look. "He's very good at easing Shane's pressure. He's a good reminder for us all, that way."

I had been wondering about Yuna's now-official son-in-law, and whether I might meet him, but I'm only half prepared to find Ilya Rozanov in the kitchen when I step back through the door. Tall, square-jawed, and in a t-shirt he's stretching out over his biceps, he makes an imposing figure. Hollander is there too, back from what I presume was a quick workout — or maybe just a private chat with his husband. There's coffee on the table and a mug in Hollander's hand as he greets me again and offers me a drink.

I note that Rozanov doesn't extend the same politeness. This is one of the other aspects that surprised people about Hollander and Rozanov's relationship — they were just so *different* — surely they couldn't work? Rozanov's on-ice reputation is, for lack of a more sophisticated term, that of a professional shit stirrer. When he was drafted, people called him a born Boston Bear. He can reach corners and scoop up pucks in the tightest of spaces, he can fluster the opposition, he's got the highest face off win percentage in the league — not even Hollander can beat him there — and he does it all while scoring highlight reel goals, often goading the other team's home crowd with a hand to his ear in the celebration afterward. If you search Rozanov's name on YouTube, you will be met by compilation videos of his sassiest media soundbites. For a few years, his Instagram bio was the middle finger emoji — just in case he hadn't made himself clear. If this were a persona, Rozanov enjoyed playing into it.

He shakes my hand as we settle on the couch, but unlike the Hollanders, who are ready to make nice, I get the distinct impression that Rozanov has made no such promises. He sits next to his husband, leaving a gap between them, but his arm trails across the back of the couch, inches away from Hollander's shoulder.

I start by offering my commiserations to both Hollander and Rozanov on the Centaurs' recent playoff performance — they lost in the Eastern Conference Final to the Brooklyn Scouts, a team who are finally pulling out of a painful rebuild. It's Rozanov who answers, with a dismissive flick of his wrist. "We are better. Losing was unfortunate, but it is not the end."

It's true, the series was tight. It went all the way to game 7, and ended in a marginal 3-2 loss for the Centaurs, just enough to seal their ticket home. Hollander's response is predictably more placid. "It's exciting to see teams like Brooklyn — and Ottawa — turn things around in recent years," he says. "All credit to Brooklyn. They were the better team on the night." Brooklyn eventually lost to the champions, Colorado, but it's interesting to hear Hollander draw comparisons between the two teams. Brooklyn are being powered by a young roster, stacked with draft picks. In comparison, Ottawa's change in fortune has very clearly been Hollander — now a veteran presence — and his introduction to the team. Certainly, having Rozanov and Hollander as 1a and 1b centers packs a formidable punch.

When I ask Rozanov directly what Hollander signing has done for the team, he raises his eyebrows at me, incredulous at the question. "Everything, of course. He makes it all possible."

Possible — such as winning the cup again, but this time together? Did they ever dream that was something that would be within reach? Hollander, who is looking faintly embarrassed by Rozanov's praise — an endearing trait for the league's regular season scoring leader — shakes his head no, and begins to answer, but Rozanov cuts him off. "I dreamed it. I spent a

lot of time dreaming it. Years of dreaming. I needed Shane's help to make it real. Next year, I know it — we will win."

Hollander turns his face away. I can't tell if he's blushing more or swallowing down the desire to cry. I would not blame him for either reaction. It's hard to imagine what that win might mean to them both, after what they have been through together. Rozanov lets his hand drop to Hollander's shoulder and squeezes — and now *I'm* the one who feels like they should be looking away.

Certainly, Rozanov and Hollander lifting the cup would make a very strong statement to a league that has, on the whole, been lukewarm in their welcome of the couple. And, as Rozanov so strongly suggested, it's a real possibility. Last season was their first playing as teammates after years of being rivals, and new systems and new locker rooms take a while to settle into. The dynamism they bring is electric, and although they rarely share the ice — Centaurs coach Brandon Wiebe wisely chooses to spread their talent across the two power play units — it's their chemistry that seems to have turned the Centaurs' ship around. Being together on the bench is enough. Last week, The Athletic published their (very early) predictions for next year's champions. The Centaurs were top of the list.

More composed, Hollander adds, "I think Ilya's right. We stand a really good chance. We've proved ourselves now, got experience under our belt, and there's no reason we can't go all the way. It would be the honor of my life to win a cup for my hometown with Ilya."

Rozanov's grin splits his face. "I will pass the cup to you first, Hollander."

It's amusing to see Hollander roll his eyes. "Yeah, well. You fucking better. I'm your alternate captain."

As I wrap up, I ask a few questions about the rest of their summer. Hollander and Rozanov, long before they revealed their relationship, cofounded the Irina Foundation, which raises awareness of and money for mental health charities. Hollander says it's a cause that's close to his heart. The foundation is named after Rozanov's mother and is run by Yuna Hollander. If it was touching when they made the announcement back in 2018, it is even more so now that it's clearly a family affair. "We'll be running the hockey training camps," Hollander confirms. "I'm looking forward to it. It's always a really rewarding couple of weeks."

Other than that, do they have anything planned? "We will keep ourselves busy here," Rozanov says, patting the couch — which I take to mean the cottage.

"Right. We have training regimes to stick to. Ilya and I know what it takes to win." With four Stanley Cups and countless playoff games between them, I imagine they do.

They decline to share any other plans. I spot Yuna Hollander over their shoulder, ready to politely chivvy me back to my car. But before I allow her to do that, I risk one more question.

Does Hollander think that if he and Rozanov had not made their relationship public, he might have stuck with the team that drafted him? A lot of hockey fans reference hockey magic at one point or another; either their team has it or doesn't, depending on the outcome of the

game/playoff series/draft lottery/etc. There's a lot of superstition in the league. Maybe a Centaurs' Cup win has been waiting in the wings all along? Does Hollander believe in that?

Hollander looks thoughtful — if a little taken aback by the question. "I don't know that I believe in superstition like that," he says finally. "Playing with Ilya wasn't fate. It was a choice we made happen, and I'm glad we did. Maybe if I never met Ilya, I would have been in Montreal my whole career. I can't say. It didn't happen like that. I'm grateful for what I have now and the chance to win with Ilya. But we haven't won yet."

It's a careful, conservative answer, but it still makes me reflect. Maybe, I consider, choice *is* more romantic than fate, after all.

As I start to thank Hollander for his honesty and get up to leave, Rozanov interrupts.

"It is true. Shane and I chose this plan. Hockey brought us together. Hockey was the reason we met, but our relationship is bigger than hockey. Maybe that is from the universe, yes?"

Rozanov's answer surprises me. It's unerringly Romantic, capital R. I think of seventeen-year-old Shane on his family's computer again, reading Rozanov's name on that hot summer evening. Maybe the universe can only drop a hint. Maybe the rest — the way we play, the choices we make, how we deal with the fallout when things don't go our way — is up to the individual players themselves. Fate has to be elbowed out.

Hollander — and Rozanov — are now in a position where they're trying to make the choices they've been allowed count.

"You are a hockey fan?" Rozanov demands as he walks me out to my car. I can't decide if it's a gentlemanly act or if he's making sure to escort me off the premises. I'm almost afraid to tell him that I am. I grew up in Columbus, forcibly initiated into becoming a die-hard fan of the Cannons since I was small, thanks to my father. But I have also gained a small amount of sympathy for the New York Admirals since moving to the city, and Scott Hunter's coming out. Rozanov looks unimpressed by both admissions.

"Next year," he instructs me, as he hangs over my open car door, "you will cheer for the Centaurs when we win."

And since everything in hockey isn't as set in stone as it might first appear — and perhaps shouldn't be — and though switching team allegiances is borderline sacrilegious, I understand that sometimes change is necessary, and sometimes greater things are at play. Bandwagonning during the playoffs is also an excellent excuse. Unfortunately, the Cannons' hockey magic has long been absent, so there's no danger of a conflict of interest there.

I say that maybe I will.

Rozanov is laughing as he waves me off.

End Notes

As always, would love to hear from you. I had fun writing this.

You can find me at zeegras.tumblr.com if you like!

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